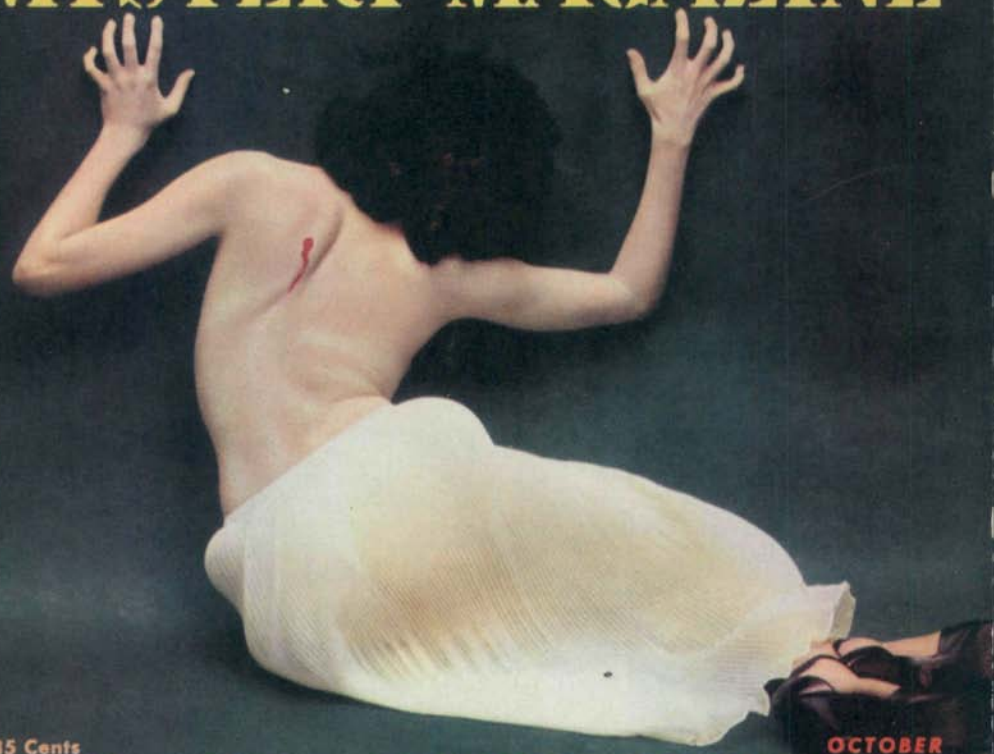


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DETECTIVE STORIES

Hildegard Withers and John J. Malone in
ONCE UPON A TRAIN

Craig Rice & Stuart Palmer 3

Department of Dead Ends in
THE IMPROMPTU MURDER

Roy Vickers 22

Solar Pons in
THE SIX SILVER SPIDERS

August Derleth 65

THE GOLDEN DOZEN

Reggie Fortune in
THE YELLOW SLUGS

H. C. Bailey 33

CRIME STORIES

FANG TOI MAKES A BARGAIN
THE WOMAN WHO WAS AFRAID
THE SUSPECT

Lemuel De Bra 61
Ruth Alix Ashen 84
Oscar Schisgall 140

PUZZLE STORY

THE SIGN OF JUSTICE

Mark Roney 81

WHODUNIT

END PLAY

Harry Kemelman 93

HOWDUNIT

THE MYSTERIOUS WEAPON

Jacques Futrelle 105

WHYDUNIT

GUILTY

Fannie Hurst 122

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WINNERS OF A SECOND PRIZE: CRAIG RICE & STUART PALMER



JOHN J. MALONE

There is so much to write about Craig Rice's and Stuart Palmer's "Once Upon a Train" that we hardly know where to begin. . . . For one thing, the story (under the title "The Loco Motive") received a lot of newspaper publicity even before it was officially announced

as a prize-winner in EQMM's Fifth Annual Contest (did you know that Craig Rice was once a crack publicity woman, and if memory serves she blew the trumpet and drove the bandwagon for no less a client than Gipsy Rose Lee?). Then, — again before the official announcement of its prize-winning status (we continued to be beaten to the punch all through this affair, until we felt like a prizefighter being set up for the haymaker) — then, as we started to say, MGM purchased the story, still called "The Loco Motive," as a possible vehicle for the actress who played Ma Kettle in "The Egg and I," and now we wonder which will come first, the chicken or the egg — no, we don't mean that! — we mean, which will come first, the story version or the movie adaptation?

We are understandably confused — and who wouldn't be, caught in the middle between two such impractical jokers as solicitor Malone and schoolteacher Hildegard — or do we mean the irresistible Craig and the irrepressible Stu?

But we simply must get serious. . . . For the first time in homicidal history two well-known mystery authors have combined their chief characters in a single story. In "Once Upon a Train" the bibulous John J. Malone meets the babbling Hildegard Withers. "Hi-yo Hildegard!" mumbled the malefactor-hunting Malone. "Mister Malone!" gasped the homicide-hunting Hildegard. And as Stuart Palmer remarked to us in one of his letters, the two are as contrasty as oil and vinegar, and go just about as well together . . .

Imagine, if you will, some other manhunting mergers. . . . Can you see misogynous Sherlock being consulted by Lady Molly of Scotland Yard, instead of G. Lestrade or Tobias Gregson, and forming a ferreting fellowship which might elevate Lady Molly to the rank of The Woman, II . . . or Dr. Thorndyke in criminological cahoots with Violet Strange . . . or Father Brown as half of a sleuthing



MISS WITHERS

syndicate with Miss Marple . . . or Mrs. North breezing past the breezy Archie Goodwin to become Nero Wolfe's right-hand woman . . . or a private-eye partnership between rough, tough Sam Spade and rough, tough Mrs. Pym?

Maybe Craig Rice and Stuart Palmer have started something!

As a matter of cold, hard fact, however, Miss Withers and John J. Malone have met before. Stuart Palmer reminded us that in MISS WITHERS REGRETS the definitely non-misogynous Malone made a sort of sideways entrance: he whipped in, in his most impressive courtroom manner, confused the opposition, made a pass at the district attorney's blonde secretary, and departed in a blaze of glory. "Some guy named Malone or Mahoney . . ." (see page 179 of the book)

All of which is really beside the point: here is a 'tec treat of a titanic twosome — read and rejoice!

ONCE UPON A TRAIN

by CRAIG RICE & STUART PALMER

IT WAS NOTHING, really," said John J. Malone with weary modesty. "After all, I never lost a client yet."

The party in Chicago's famed Pump Room was being held to celebrate the miraculous acquittal of Stephen Larsen, a machine politician accused of dipping some thirty thousand dollars out of the municipal till. Malone had proved to the jury and to himself that his client was innocent — at least, innocent of that particular charge.

It was going to be a nice party, the little lawyer kept telling himself. By the way Larsen's so-called friends were bending their elbows, the tab would be colossal. Malone hoped fervently that his fee for services rendered would be taken care of today, before Larsen's guests bankrupted

him. Because there was the matter of two months' back office rent —

"Thank you, I will," Malone said, as the waiter picked up his empty glass. He wondered how he could meet the redhead at the next table, who looked sultry and bored in the midst of a dull family party. As soon as he got his money from Larsen he would start a rescue operation. The quickest way to make friends, he always said, was to break a hundred dollar bill in a bar, and that applied even to curvaceous redheads in Fath models.

But where *was* Steve Larsen? Lolly was here, wearing her most angelic expression and a slinky gown which she overflowed considerably at the top. She was hinting that the party also celebrated a reconciliation.

between herself and Stevie; that the divorce was off. She had hocked her bracelet again, and Malone remembered hearing that her last show had closed after six performances. If she got her hand back into Steve's pocket, Malone reflected, goodbye to his fee of three grand.

He'd made elaborate plans for that money. They not only included the trip to Bermuda which he'd been promising himself for twenty years, but also the redhead he'd been promising himself for twenty minutes.

Others at the table were worrying too. "Steve is late, even for him!" spoke up Allen Roth suddenly.

Malone glanced at the porcine paving-contractor who was rumored to be Larsen's secret partner, and murmured, "Maybe he got his dates mixed."

"He'd better show," Roth said, in a voice as cold as a grave-digger's shovel.

The little lawyer shivered, and realized that he wasn't the only guest who had come here to make a collection. But he simply had to have that money. \$3,000 — \$30,000. He wondered, half-musing, if he shouldn't have made his contingent fee, say, \$2,995. This way it almost looked like —

"What did you say about ten per cent, counselor?" Bert Glick spoke up wisely.

Malone recovered himself. "You misunderstood me. I merely said, 'When on pleasure bent, never muzzle the ox when he treadeth out the corn.'

I mean rye." He turned to look for the waiter, not solely from thirst. The little lawyer would often have been very glad to buy back his introduction to Bert Glick.

True, the city-hall hanger-on had been helpful during the trial. In fact, it had been his testimony as a prosecution witness that cinched the acquittal, for he had made a surprise switch on several moot points of the indictment. Glick was a private detective turned bail-bondsman, clever at tapping wires and dipping his spoon into any gravy that was being passed.

Glick slapped Malone on the back and said, "If you knew what I know, you wouldn't be looking at your watch all the time. Because this ain't a coming-out party, it's a surprise party. And the surprise is that the host ain't gonna be here!"

Malone went cold — as cold as Allen Roth's gray eyes across the table. "Keep talking," he said, adding in a whisper a few facts which Glick might not care to have brought to the attention of the district attorney.

"You don't need to be so nasty," Glick said. He rose suddenly to his feet, lifting his glass. "A toast! A toast to good ol' Stevie, our pal, who's taking the Super-Century for New York tonight, next stop Paris or Rio. And with him, my fine feathered friends, he's taking the dough he owes most of us, and a lot more too. Bon voyage!" The man absorbed the contents of his glass and slowly collapsed in his chair.

There was a sudden hullabaloo

around the table. Malone closed his eyes for just five seconds, resigning himself to the certainty that his worst suspicions were true. When he opened his eyes again, the redhead was gone. He looked at his watch. There was still a chance of catching that New York train, with a quick stop at Joe the Angel's bar to borrow the price of a ticket. Malone rushed out of the place, wasting no time in farewells. Everybody else was leaving too. Finally, Bert Glick was alone, alone with the waiter and with the check.

As Malone had expected, Joe the Angel took a very dim view of the project, pointing out that it was probably only throwing good money after bad. But he handed over enough for a round trip, plus Pullman. By the time his cab had dumped him at the I.C. station, Malone had decided to settle for one-way. He needed spending money for the trip. There were poker games on trains.

Suddenly he saw the redhead! She was jammed in a crowd at the gate, crushed between old ladies, noisy sailors, and a bearded patriarch in the robes of the Greek Orthodox Church. She struggled with a mink coat, a yowling cat in a traveling case, and a caged parrot.

Malone leaped gallantly to her rescue, and for a brief moment was allowed to hold the menagerie, before a Redcap took over. The moment was just long enough for the lawyer to have his hand clawed by the irate cat, and for him and the parrot to develop a lifelong dislike. But he did

hear the girl say, "Compartment B in Car 10, please." And her warm grateful smile sent him racing off in search of the Pullman conductor.

Considerable eloquence, some trifling liberties with the truth, and a ten-dollar bill got him possession of the drawing-room next to a certain compartment. That settled, he paused to make a quick deal with a roving Western Union boy, and more money changed hands. When he finally swung aboard the already-moving train, he felt fairly confident that the trip would be pleasant and eventful. And lucrative, of course. The minute he got his hands on Steve Larsen . . .

Once established in the drawing-room, Malone studied himself in the mirror, whistling a few bars of *On the Wabash Cannonball*. For the moment the primary target could wait. He was glad he was wearing his favorite Finchley suit, and his new green and lavender Sulka tie.

"A man of distinction," he thought. True, his hair was slightly mussed, a few cigar ashes peppered his vest, and the Sulka tie was beginning to creep toward one ear, but the total effect was good. Inspired, he sat down to compose a note to Operation Redhead, in the next compartment. He knew it was the right compartment, for the parrot was already giving out with imitations of a boiler factory, assisted by the cat.

He wrote: *Lovely lady, let's not fight Fate. We were destined to have dinner together. I am holding my breath for your yes. Your unknown admirer,*

JJM: He poked the note under the connecting door, rapped lightly, and waited.

After a long moment the note came back, with an addition in a surprisingly precise hand. *Sir, you have picked the wrong girl. Besides, I had dinner in the Pump Room over an hour ago, and so I believe did you.*

Undaunted, Malone whistled another bar of the song. Just getting any answer at all was half the battle. So she'd noticed him in the Pump Room! He sat down and wrote swiftly, *Please, an after-dinner liqueur with me, then?*

This time the answer was: *My dear sir: MY DEAR SIR!* But the little lawyer thought he heard sounds of feminine laughter, though of course it might have been the parrot. He sat back, lighted a fresh cigar, and waited. They were almost to Gary now, and if the telegram had got through —

It had, and a messenger finally came aboard with an armful of luscious *Gruss von Teplitz* roses. Malone intercepted him long enough to add a note which really should be the clincher. *To the Rose of Tralee, who makes all other women look like withered dandelions. I'll be waiting in the club car. Faithfully, John J. Malone.* That was the way, he told himself happily. Don't give her a chance to say *No* again.

After a long and somewhat bruising trip through lurching Pullman cars, made longer still because he first headed fore instead of aft, Malone finally sank into a chair in the club-car lounge, facing the door. Of course, she

would take time to arrange the roses, make a corsage out of a couple of buds, and probably shift into an even more startling gown. It might be quite a wait. He waved at the bar steward and said, "Rye, please, with a rye chaser."

"You mean rye with a beer chaser, Mista Malone?"

"If you know my name, you know enough not to confuse me. I mean beer with a rye chaser!" When the drink arrived Malone put it where it would do the most good, and then for lack of anything better to do fell to staring in awed fascination at the lady who had just settled down across the aisle.

She was a tall, angular person who somehow suggested a fairly well-dressed scarecrow. Her face seemed faintly familiar, and Malone wondered if they'd met before. Then he decided that she reminded him of a three-year-old who had winked at him in the paddock at Washington Park one Saturday and then run out of the money.

Topping the face — as if anything could — was an incredible headpiece consisting of a grass-green crown surrounded by a brim of nodding flowers, wreaths, and ivy. All it seemed to need was a nice marble tombstone.

She looked up suddenly from her magazine. "Pardon me, but did you say something about a well-kept grave?" Her voice reminded Malone of a certain Miss Hackett who had talked him out of quitting second-year high school. Somehow he found

himself strangely unable to lie to her.

"Madam, do you read minds?"

"Not minds, Mr. Malone. *Lips*, sometimes." She smiled. "Are you really the John J. Malone?"

He blinked. "How in the — oh, of course! The *magazine*! Those fact-detective sheets *will* keep writing up my old cases. Are you a crime-story fan, Mrs. —?"

"Miss. Hildegarde Withers, school-teacher by profession and meddlesome old snoop by avocation, at least according to the police. Yes, I've read about you. You solve crimes and right wrongs, but usually by pure accident while chasing through saloons after some young woman who is no better than she should be. Are you on a case now?"

"Working my way through the second bottle," he muttered, suddenly desperate. It would never do for the redhead to come in and find him tied up with this character.

"I didn't mean that kind of a case," Miss Withers explained. "I gather that even though you've never lost a client, you have mislaid one at the moment?"

Malone shivered. The woman had second sight, at least. He decided that it would be better if he went back through the train and met the Rose of Tralee, who must certainly be on her way here by this time. He could also keep an eye open for Steve Larsen. With a hasty apology he got out of the club car, pausing only to purchase a handy pint of rye from the bar steward, and started on a long slow

prowl of mile after mile of wobbling, jerking cars. The rye, blending not unpleasantly with the champagne he had taken on earlier, made everything a little hazy and unreal. He kept getting turned around and blundering into the long-deserted diner. Two or three times he bumped into the Greek Orthodox priest with the whiskers, and similarly kept interrupting four sailors shooting craps in a men's lounge.

But — no redhead. And no Larsen. Finally the train stopped — could it be Toledo already? Malone dashed to the vestibule and hung over the step, to make sure that Steve didn't disembark. When they were moving again he resumed his pilgrimage, though by this time he had resigned himself to the fact that he was being stood up by the Rose of Tralee. At last, he turned mournfully back toward where his own lonesome cubicle ought to be — and then suddenly found himself back in the club car!

No redheaded Rose. Even The Hat had departed, taking her copy of *Official Fact Detective Stories* with her. The car was deserted except for a bridge game going on in one corner and a sailor — obviously half-seas over — who was drowsing in a big chair with a newspaper over his face.

The pint was empty. Malone told the steward to have it buried with full military honors, and to fetch him a cheese on rye. "On second thought, skip the cheese and make it just straight rye, please."

The drink arrived, and with it a

whispered message. There was a lady waiting down the corridor.

Malone emptied his glass and followed the steward, trying to slip him five dollars. It slipped right back. "Thanks, Mister Malone, but I can't take money from an old classmate. Remember, we went through the last two years of Kent College of Law together?"

Malone gasped. "Class of '25. And you're Homer — no, *Horace* Lee Randolph. But —"

"What am I doing here? The old story. Didn't know my place, and got into Chicago southside politics. Bumped up against the machine, and got disbarred on a phony charge of subornation of perjury. It could have been squared by handing a grand to a certain sharper at City Hall, but I didn't have the money." Horace shrugged. "This pays better than law, anyway. For instance, that lady handed me five dollars just to unlock the private lounge and tell you she's waiting to see you there."

The little lawyer winced. "She — was she a queer old maid in a hat that looked like she'd made it herself?"

"Oh, no. No hat."

Malone breathed easier. "Was she young and lovely?"

"My weakness is the Numbers game, but I should say the description is accurate."

Humming *But 'twas not her beauty alone that won me, oh, no, 'twas the truth*, Malone straightened his tie and opened the door,

Lolly Larsen exploded in his face

with all the power of a firecracker under a tin can. She grabbed his lapels and yelled: "Well, where is the dirty —?"

"Be more specific. Which dirty —?"

Malone said, pulling himself loose.

"*Steve*, of course!"

"I don't know, but I still hope he's somewhere on this train. You joining me in the search? Nice to have your pretty face among us."

Lolly had the face of a homesick angel. Her hair was exactly the color of a twist of lemon peel in a glass of champagne brut, her mouth was an overripe strawberry, and her figure might have inspired the French bathing-suit, but her eyes were cold and strange as a mermaid's. "Are you in this with Steve?" she demanded.

Malone said: "In simple, one-syllable words that even you can understand — No!"

Lolly suddenly relaxed, swaying against him so that he got a good whiff of brandy, nail polish, and Chanel Number 5. "I'm sorry. I guess I'm just upset. I feel so terribly helpless —"

For Malone's money, she was as helpless as an eight-button rattlesnake. "You see," Lolly murmured, "I'm partly to blame for Steve's running away. I should have stood by him at the trial, but I hadn't the courage. Even afterward — I didn't actually promise to come back to him, I just said I'd come to his party. I meant to tell him — in the Pump Room. So, please, please help me find him — so I can make him see how

much we really *need* each other!"

Malone said, "Try it again, and flick the eyelashes a little bit more when you come to 'need each other.'"

Lolly jerked away and called him a number of things, of which "dirty little shyster" was the most complimentary. "All right," she finally said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Steve's carrying a hundred grand, and you can guess how he got it. I happen to know — Glick isn't the *only* one who's been spying on him since he got out of jail yesterday. I don't want Steve back, but I do want a fat slice for keeping my mouth shut. One word from me to the D.A. or the papers, and not even you can get him off."

"Go on," Malone said wearily. "But you interest me in less ways than one."

"Find Steve!" she told him. "Make a deal and I'll give you ten per cent of the take. But work fast, because we're not the only ones looking for him. Steve doublecrossed everybody who was at that party this afternoon. He's somewhere on this train, but he's probably shaved off his mustache, or put on a fright-wig, or —"

Malone yawned and said, "Where can I get in touch with you?"

"I couldn't get a reservation of any kind." Her strange eyes warmed hopefully. "But I hear you have a drawing-room?"

"Don't look at me in that tone of voice," Malone said hastily. "Besides, I snore. Maybe there'll be something available for you at the next stop."

He was out of there and back in

the club car before Lolly could turn on any more of the charm. He decided to have one for the road — the New York Central Road, and one for the Pennsy too. The sensible thing was to find Steve Larsen, collect his own hard-earned fee, and let Lolly alone. Her offer of ten per cent of the blackmail take touched on a sore spot.

Malone began to work his way through the train again, this time desperately questioning porters. The worst of it was, there was nothing remarkable about Larsen's appearance except curly-hair, which he'd probably had straightened and dyed, a mustache that could have been shaved off, and a brief-case full of money, which he'd probably hidden. In fact, the man was undoubtedly laughing at everybody from behind a false set of whiskers.

Such were Malone's thoughts as he suddenly came face to face again with the Greek Orthodox priest, who stared past him through thick, tinted spectacles. The little lawyer hesitated and was lost. Throwing caution to the winds, he yanked vigorously at the beard. But it was an orthodox beard, attached in the orthodox manner. Its owner let loose a blast which just possibly might have been an orthodox Greek blessing. Malone didn't wait to find out.

His ears were still burning when he stepped into a vestibule and ran head on into Miss Hildegard Withers. He nodded coldly and started past her.

"Ah, go soak your fat head!"

Malone gaped.

"It's the parrot," Miss Withers explained, holding up the caged monstrosity. "It's been making such a racket that I'm taking it to the baggage car for the night."

"Where — where did you get that — bird?" Malone asked weakly.

"Why, Sinbad is a legacy from the aunt whose funeral I just went back to attend. I'm taking him back to New York with me."

"New York!" Malone moaned. "We'll be there before I find that —"

"You mean that Mr. Larsen?" As he stood speechless, she went briskly on. "You see, I happened to be at a family farewell party at the table next to yours in the Pump Room, and my hearing is very acute. So, for that matter, is my eyesight. Has it occurred to you that Larsen may be wearing a disguise of some sort?"

"That it has," admitted Malone sadly, thinking of the Greek priest.

The schoolteacher lowered her voice. "You remember that when we had our little chat in the club car some time ago, there was an obviously inebriated sailor dozing behind a newspaper?"

"There's one on every train," Malone said. "One or more."

"Exactly. Like Chesterton's postman, you never notice them. But somehow that particular sailor managed to stay intoxicated without ordering a single drink or nipping at a private bottle. More than that, when you suddenly left he poked his head out from behind the paper and stared

after you with a very odd expression, rather as if he suspected you had leprosy. I couldn't help noticing —"

"Madam, I love you," the lawyer said fervently. "I love you because you remind me of Miss Hackett back in Dorchester High, and because of your hat, and because you are sharper than a tack."

Miss Withers sniffed, but it was a mollified sniff. "Sorry to interrupt, but that same sailor entered our car just as I left it with the parrot. I just happened to look back, and I rather think he was trying the door of your drawing-room."

Malone clasped her hand fondly. Unfortunately it was the hand that held the cage, and the parrot took advantage of the long-awaited opportunity to nip viciously at his thumb. "Thank you so very much — some day I'll wring your silly neck," was Malone's sincere but somewhat garbled exit-line.

"Go boil your head in lard!" the bird screamed after him.

The maiden schoolteacher sighed. "Come on, Sinbad, you're going into durance vile. And I'm going to retire to my lonely couch, drat it all." She looked wistfully over her shoulder. "Some people have all the fun!"

But twelve cars, ten minutes, and four drinks later, Malone was lost again. A worried porter was saying, "If you could only remember your car number, sah?" A much-harassed Pullman conductor added, "If you'd just show us your ticket stub, we'd locate you."

"You don't need to locate *me*," Malone insisted. "I'm right here."

"Maybe you haven't got a stub."

"I have so a stub. It's in my hat-band." Crafty as an Indian guide, Malone backtracked them unerringly to his drawing-room. "Here's the stub — now where am I?"

The porter looked out the window and said, "Just coming into Altoona, sah."

"*They lay in the wreck when they found them, they had died when the engine had fell . . .*" sang Malone happily. But the conductor winced and said they'd be going.

"You might as well," Malone told him. "If neither of you can sing baritone."

The door closed behind them, and a moment later a soft voice called, "Mr. Malone?"

He stared at the connecting door. *The Rose of Tralee*, Malone told himself happily. He adjusted his tie, and tried the door. Miraculously, it opened. Then he saw that it was Miss Hildegard Withers, looking very worried, who stared back at him.

Malone said, "What have you done with my redhead?"

"If you refer to my niece Joannie," the schoolteacher said sharply, "she only helped me get my stuff aboard and rode as far as Englewood. But never mind that now. I'm in trouble."

"I knew there couldn't be two parrots like that on one train," Malone groaned. "Or even in one world."

"There's worse than parrots on this

train," snapped Miss Withers. "This man Larsen you were looking for —"

The little lawyer's eyes narrowed. "Just what is your interest in Larsen?"

"None whatever, except that he's here in my compartment. It's very embarrassing, because he's not only dead, he's *undressed*!"

"Holy St. Vitus!" gulped Malone. "Quiet! Keep *calm*. Lock your door and *don't* talk!"

"My door is locked, and who's talking?" The schoolteacher stepped aside and Malone peered gingerly past her. The speed with which he was sobering up probably established a new record. It was Larsen, all right. He was face down on the floor, dressed only in black shoes, blue socks, and a suit of long underwear. There was also a moderate amount of blood.

At last Malone said hoarsely, "I suspect foul play!"

"Knife job," said Miss Withers with professional coolness. "From the back, through the *latissimus dorsi*. Within the last twenty minutes, I'd say. If I hadn't had some difficulty in convincing the baggage men that Sinbad should be theirs for the night, I might have walked in on the murderer at work." She gave Malone a searching glance. "It wasn't *you*, by any chance?"

"Do you think I'd murder a man who owed me \$3000?" Malone demanded indignantly. He scowled. "But a lot of people are going to jump to that conclusion. Nice of you not to raise an alarm."

She sniffed. "You didn't think I'd

care to have a man — even a dead man — found in my room in this state of undress? Obviously, he hasn't your money on his person. So — what is to be done about it?"

"I'll defend you for nothing," John J. Malone promised. "Justifiable homicide. Besides, you were framed. He burst in upon you and you stabbed him in defense of your honor . . ."

"Just a minute! The corpse was *your* client. You've been publicly asking for him all through the train. I'm only an innocent bystander." She paused. "In my opinion, Larsen was lured to your room purposely by someone who had penetrated his disguise. He was stabbed, and dumped here. Very clever, because if the body had been left in your room, you could have got rid of it or claimed that you were framed. But this way, to the police mind at least, it would be obvious that you did the job and then tried to palm it off on the nearest neighbor."

Malone sagged weakly against the berth. His hand brushed against the leather case, and something slashed viciously at his fingers. "But I thought you got rid of that parrot!" he cried.

"I did," Miss Withers assured him. "That's Precious in his case. A twenty-pound Siamese, also part of my recent legacy. Don't get too close, the creature dislikes train travel and is in a foul temper."

Malone stared through the wire window and said, "Its father must have been either a bobcat or a buzz saw."

"My aunt left me her mink coat,

on condition that I take both her pets," Miss Withers explained wearily. "But I'm beginning to think it would be better to shiver through these cold winters. And speaking of cold — I'm a patient woman, but not very. You have one minute, Mr. Malone, to get your dead friend out of here!"

"He's no friend of mine, dead or alive," Malone began. "And I suggest —"

There was a heavy knocking on the corridor door. "Open up in there!"

"Say something!" whispered Malone. "Say you're undressed!"

"You're undressed — I mean, I'm undressed," she cried obediently.

"Sorry, ma'am," a masculine voice said on the other side of the door. "But we're searching this train for a fugitive from justice. Hurry, please."

"Just a minute," sang out the schoolteacher, making frantic gestures at Malone.

The little lawyer shuddered, then grabbed the late Steve Larsen and tugged him through the connecting door into his drawing-room. Meanwhile, Miss Withers cast aside maidenly modesty and tore pins from her hair, the dress from her shoulders. Clutching a robe around her, she opened the door a crack and announced, "This is an *outrage!*"

The train conductor, a Pullman conductor, and two Altoona police detectives crowded in, ignoring her protest. They pawed through the wardrobe, peered into every nook and cranny.

Miss Withers stood rooted to the spot, in more ways than one. There was a damp brownish-red spot on the carpet, and she had one foot firmly holding it down. At last the delegation backed out, with apologies. Then she heard a feeble, imploring tapping on the connecting door, and John J. Malone's voice whispering, "Help!"

The maiden schoolteacher stuck her head out into the corridor again, where the search-party was already waiting for Malone to open up. "Oh, officer!" she cried tremulously, "is there any danger?"

"No, ma'am."

"Was the man you're looking for a burly, dark-complexioned cut-throat with dark glasses and a pronounced limp in the left leg?"

"No, lady. Get lost, please, lady."

"Because on my way back from the diner I saw a man like that. He leered, and then followed me through three cars."

"The man we're looking for is an embezzler, not a mental case." They hammered on Malone's door again. "Open up in there!"

Over her shoulder Miss Withers could see the pale, perspiring face of John J. Malone as he dragged Steve Larsen back into her compartment again.

"But, officer," she improvised desperately, "I'm sure that the awful dark man who followed me was a distinct criminal type—" There was a reassuring whisper of "Okay" from behind her, and the sound of a softly

closing door. Miss Withers backed into her compartment, closed and locked the connecting door, and then sank down on the edge of her berth, trying to avoid the blankly staring eyes of the dead man.

Next door there was a rumble of voices, and then suddenly Malone's high tenor doing rough justice to *Did Your Mother Come from Ireland?* The schoolteacher heard no more than the first line of the chorus before the jello in her knees melted completely. When she opened her eyes again, she saw Malone holding a dagger before her, and she very nearly fainted again.

"You were so right," the little lawyer told her admiringly. "It was a frame-up all right—but meant for me. *This* was tucked into the upholstery of my room. I sat on it while they were searching, and had to burst into song to cover my howl of anguish."

"Oh, dear!" said Miss Withers.

He sat down beside her, patted her comfortingly on the shoulder, and said, "Maybe I can shove the body out the window!"

"We're still in the station," she reminded him crisply. "And from what experience I've had with train windows, it would be easier to solve the murder than open one. Why don't we start searching for clues?"

Malone stood up so quickly that he rapped his head on the bottom of the upper berth. "Never mind *clues*. Let's just find the murderer!"

"Just as easy as that?"

"Look," he said. "This train was

searched at the request of the Chicago police because somebody — probably Bert Glick — tipped them off that Larsen and a lot of stolen money are on board. The word has got around. Obviously, somebody else knew — somebody who caught the train and did the dirty work. It's reasonable to assume that whoever has the money is the killer."

There was a new glint in Miss Withers' blue-gray eyes. "Go on."

"Also, Larsen's ex-wife — or do I mean ex-widow? — is aboard. I saw her. She is a lovely girl whose many friends agree that she would eat her young or sell her old mother down the river into slavery for a fast buck." He took out a cigar. "I'll go next door and have a smoke while you change, and then we'll go look for Lolly Larsen."

"I'm practically ready now," the schoolteacher agreed. "But take *that* with you!"

Malone hesitated, and then with a deep sigh reached down and took a firm grasp of all that was mortal of his late client. "Here we go again!"

A few minutes later Miss Hildgarde Withers was following Malone through the now-darkened train. The fact that this was somebody else's problem never occurred to her. Murder, according to her tenets, was everybody's business.

Malone touched her arm as they came at last to the door of the club car. "Here is where I saw Lolly last," he whispered. "She only got aboard at the last minute, and didn't have a

reservation." He pointed down the corridor. "See that door, just this side of the pantry? It's a private lounge, used only for railroad officials or big-shots like governors or senators. Lolly bribed the steward to let her use it when she wanted to have a private talk with me. It just occurred to me that she might have talked him into letting her have it for the rest of the night. If she's still there —"

"Say no more," Miss Withers cut in. "I am a fellow-passenger, also without a berth, seeking only a place to rest my weary head. After all, I have as much right in there as she has. But you will be within call, won't you?"

"If you need help, just holler," he promised. Malone watched as the schoolteacher marched down the corridor, tried the lounge door gently, and then knocked. The door opened and she vanished inside.

The little lawyer had an argument with his conscience. It wasn't just that she reminded him of Miss Hackett, it was that she had become a sort of partner. Besides, he was getting almost fond of that equine face.

Oh, well, he'd be within earshot. And if there was anything in the inspiration which had just come to him, she wasn't in any real danger anyway. He went on into the bar. It was half-dark and empty now, except for a little group of men in Navy uniforms at the far end, who were sleeping sprawled and entangled like a litter of puppies.

"Sorry, Mister Malone, but the bar

is closed," a voice spoke up behind him. It was Horace Lee Randolph, looking drawn and exhausted. He caught Malone's glance toward the sleeping sailors and added, "Against the rules, but the conductor said don't bother 'em."

Malone nodded, and then said, "Horace, we're old friends and classmates. You know me of old, and you know you can trust me. *Where did you hide it?*"

"Where did I hide what?"

"You know what!" Malone fixed the man with the cold and baleful eye he used on prosecution witnesses. "Let me have it before it's too late, and I'll do my best for you."

The eyes rolled. "Oh, Lawdy! I knew I shouldn't a done it, Mista Malone! I'll show you!" Horace hurried on down through the car and unlocked a small closet filled with mops and brooms. From a box labeled *Soap Flakes* he came up with a paper sack. It was a very small sack to hold a hundred thousand dollars, Malone thought, even if the money was in big bills. Horace fumbled inside the sack.

"What's *that*?" Malone demanded.

"What would it be but the bottle of gin I sneaked from the bar? Join me?"

The breath went out of John J. Malone like air out of a busted balloon. He caught the doorknob for support, swaying like an aspen in the wind. It was just at that moment that they both heard the screams.

The rush of self-confidence with which Miss Hildegard Withers had

pushed her way into the lounge ebbed somewhat as she came face to face with Lolly Larsen. Appeals to sympathy, as from one supposedly-stranded fellow passenger to another, failed utterly. It was not until the schoolteacher played her last card, reminding Lolly sharply that if there was any commotion the Pullman conductor would undoubtedly have them both evicted, that she succeeded in getting a toe-hold.

"Oh, *all right!*" snarled Lolly ungraciously. "Only shut up and go to sleep."

During the few minutes before the room went dark again, Miss Withers made a mental snapshot of everything in it. No toilet, no wardrobe, no closet. A small suitcase, a coat, and a handbag were on the only chair. The money must be somewhere in this room, the schoolteacher thought. There was a way to find out.

As the train flashed through the moonlit night, Miss Withers busily wriggled out of her petticoat and ripped it into shreds. Using a bit of paper from her handbag for tinder — and inwardly praying it wasn't a ten-dollar bill — she did what had to be done. A few minutes later she burst out into the corridor, holding her handkerchief to her mouth.

She almost bumped into one of the sailors who came lurching toward her along the narrow passage, and gasped, "What do you want?"

He stared at her with heavy eyes, "If it's any of your business, I'm looking for the latrine," he said dryly.

When he was out of sight, Miss Withers turned and peeked back into the lounge. A burst of acrid smoke struck her in the face. Now was the time. "Fire!" she shrieked.

Thick billows of greasy smoke flooded out through the half-open door. Inside, little tongues of red flame ran greedily along the edge of the seat where Miss Withers had tucked the burning rags and paper.

Down the corridor came Malone and Horace Lee Randolph, and a couple of startled bluejackets appeared from the other direction. Somebody tore an extinguisher from the wall.

Miss Withers grabbed Malone's arm. "Watch her! She'll go for the money —"

The fire extinguisher sent a stream of foaming chemicals into the doorway just as Lolly Larsen burst out. Her mascara streaked down her face, already blackened by smoke, and her yellow hair was plastered unflatteringly to her skull. But she clutched a small leather case.

Somehow she tripped over Miss Withers' outstretched foot. The leather case flew across the corridor to smash against the wall, where it flew open, disclosing a multitude of creams, oils, and tiny bottles — a portable beauty parlor.

"She must have gone to sleep smoking a cigarette!" put in Miss Withers in loud clear tones. "A lucky thing I was there to smell the smoke and give the alarm —"

But John J. Malone seized her firmly by the arm and propelled her

back through the train. "It was a good try, but you can stop acting now. She doesn't have the money." Back in her own compartment he confessed about Horace. "I had a wonderful idea, but it didn't pay off. The poor guy's career as a lawyer was busted by a City Hall chiseler. If Larsen was the one, Horace might have spotted him on the train and decided to get even."

"You were holding out on me," said Miss Withers, slightly miffed.

Malone unwrapped a cigar and said, "If anybody finds that money, I want it to be me. Because I've got to get my fee out of it or I can't even get back to Chicago."

"Perhaps you'll learn to like Manhattan," she told him brightly.

Malone said grimly, "If something isn't done soon, I'm going to see Manhattan through those cold iron bars."

"We're in the same boat. Except," she added honestly, "that I don't think the Inspector would go so far as to lock me up. But he does take a dim view of anybody who finds a body and doesn't report it." She sighed. "Do you think we *could* get one of these windows open?"

Malone smothered a yawn and said, "Not in my present condition of exhaustion."

"Let's begin at the beginning," the schoolteacher said. "Larsen invited a number of people to a party he didn't plan to attend. He sneaked on this train, presumably disguised in a Navy enlisted man's uniform. How he got hold of it —"

"He was in the Service for a while," said the little lawyer.

"The murderer made a date to meet his victim in your drawing-room, hoping to set *you* up as the goat. He stuck a knife in him and then stripped him, looking for a money-belt or something."

"You don't have to undress a man to find a money-belt," Malone murmured.

"Really? I wouldn't know." Miss Withers sniffed. "The knife was then hidden in your room, but the body was moved in here. The money—" she paused and studied him searchingly. "Mr. Malone, are you sure you didn't —?"

"We plead not guilty and not guilty by reason of insanity," Malone muttered. He closed his eyes for just five seconds' much-needed rest, and when he opened them a dirty-looking dawn was glaring in at him through the window.

"Good morning," Miss Withers greeted him, entirely too cheerfully. "Did you get any ideas while you were in dreamland?" She put away her toothbrush and added, "You know, I've sometimes found that if a problem seems insoluble, you can sleep on it and sometimes your subconscious comes up with the answer. Sometimes it's even happened to me in a dream."

"It does? It *has*?" Malone sat up suddenly. "Okay. Burglars can't be choosers. Sleep and the world sleeps—I mean, I'll just stand watch for a while and you try taking a nap.

Maybe you can dream up an answer out of your subconscious. But dream fast, lady, because we get in about two hours from now."

But when Miss Withers had finally been comfortably settled against the pillows, she found that her eyelids stubbornly refused to stay shut.

"Try once more," John J. Malone said soothingly. She closed her eyes obediently, and his high, whispering tenor filled the little compartment, singing a fine old song. It was probably the first time in history, Miss Withers thought, that anyone had tried to use *Throw Him Down, McCluskey* as a lullaby, but she found herself drifting off . . .

Malone passed the time by trying to imagine what he would do with a hundred grand if he were the murderer. There must have been a desperate need for haste—at any moment, someone might come back to the murder room. The money would have to be put somewhere handy—some obvious place where nobody would ever think of looking, and where it could be quickly and easily retrieved when all was clear.

There was an angry growl from Precious in his cage. "If you could only say something besides 'Meerow' and 'Fssst'!" Malone murmured wistfully. "Because you're the only witness. Now if it had been the parrot . . ."

At last he touched Miss Withers apologetically on the shoulder. "Wake up, ma'am, we're coming into New York. Quick, what did you dream?"

She blinked, sniffed, and came wide-awake. "My dream? Why — I was buying a hat, a darling little sailor hat, only it had to be exchanged because the ribbon was yellow. But first I wore it out to dinner with Inspector Piper, who took me to a Greek restaurant and the proprietor was so glad to see us that he said dinner was on the house. But naturally we didn't eat anything because you have to be aware of the Greeks when they come bearing gifts. His name was Mr. Roberts. That's all I remember."

"Oh, *brother!*" said John J. Malone.

"And there wasn't anyone named Roberts mixed up in this case, or anyone of Greek extraction, was there?" She sighed. "Pure nonsense. I guess a watched subconscious never boils."

The train was crawling laboriously up an elevated platform. "A drowning man will grasp at a strawberry," Malone said suddenly. "I've got a sort of an idea. Greeks bearing gifts — that means look out for somebody who wants to give you something for nothing. And that something could include gratuitous information."

She nodded. "Perhaps someone planned to murder Larsen aboard this train and wanted you aboard to be the obvious suspect."

The train shuddered to a stop. Malone leaped up, startled, but the schoolteacher told him it was only 125th Street. "Perhaps we should check and see who gets off." She glanced out the window and said, "On second thought, let's not. The platform is swarming with police."

They were interrupted by the porter, who brushed off Miss Withers, accepted a dollar from the gallant Malone, and then lugged her suitcases and the pet container down to the vestibule. "He'll be in your room next," she whispered to Malone. "What do we do now?"

"We think fast," Malone said. "The rest of your dream! The sailor hat with the wrong ribbon! And Mr. Roberts —"

The door burst open and suddenly they were surrounded by detectives, led by a grizzled sergeant in plain-clothes. Lolly Larsen was with them. She had removed most of the traces of the holocaust, her face was lovely and her hair was gleaming, but her mood was that of a dyspeptic cobra. She breathlessly accused Miss Withers of assaulting her and trying to burn her alive, and Malone of engineering Steve Larsen's successful disappearance.

"So," said Malone. "You wired ahead from Albany, crying copper?"

"Maybe she did," said the sergeant. "But we'd already been contacted by the Chicago police. Somebody out there swore out a warrant for Steve Larsen's arrest . . ."

"Glick, maybe?"

"A Mr. Allen Roth, according to the teletype. Now, folks —"

But Malone was trying to pretend that Lolly, the sergeant, and the whole police department didn't exist. He faced Miss Withers and said, "About that dream! It must mean a sailor under false colors. We already

know that Larsen was disguised in Navy uniform . . ."

"Shaddap!" said the sergeant. "Maybe you don't know, mister, that helping an embezzler to escape makes you an assessor after the fact."

"Accessory," corrected Miss Withers firmly.

"If you want Larsen," Malone said easily, "he's next door in my drawing-room, wrapped up in the blankets."

"Sure, sure," said the sergeant, mopping his face. "Wise guy, eh?"

"Somebody helped Larsen escape — escape out of this world, with a shiv through the — through the —?" Malone looked hopefully at Miss Withers.

"The *latissimus dorsi*," she prompted.

The sergeant barked, "Never mind the double-talk. Where is this Larsen?"

Then Lolly, who had pushed open the connecting door, let out a thin scream like tearing silk. "It is Steve!" she cried. "It's Steve, and he's dead!"

Momentarily the attention of the Law was drawn elsewhere. "Now or never," said Miss Withers coolly. "About the Mr. Roberts thing — I just remembered that there was a play by that name a while back. All about sailors in the last war. I saw it, and was somewhat shocked at certain scenes. Their language — but anyway, I ran into a sailor just after I started that fire, and he said he was looking for the *latrine*. Sailors don't use Army talk — in 'Mr. Roberts' they called it *the head*!"

Suddenly the Law was back, very direct and grim about everything. Miss Withers gasped with indignation as she found herself suddenly handcuffed to John J. Malone. But stone walls do not a prison make, as she pointed out to her companion-in-crime. "And don't you see? It means —"

"Madam, I am ahead of you. There was a *wrong* sailor aboard this train even after Larsen got his. The murderer must have taken a plane from Chicago and caught this train at Toledo. I was watching to see who got off, not who got on. The man penetrated Larsen's disguise —"

"In more ways than one," the schoolteacher put in grimly.

"And then after he'd murdered his victim, he took Larsen's sailor suit and got rid of his own clothes, realizing that nobody notices a sailor on a train! Madam, I salute your subconscious!" Malone waved his hand, magnificent even in chains. "The defense rests! Officer, call a cop!"

The train was crawling into one of the tunnels beneath Grand Central Station, and the harried sergeant was beside himself. "You listen to Mr. Malone," Miss Withers told their captor firmly, "or I'll hint to my old friend Inspector Oscar Piper that you would look well on a bicycle beat way out in Brooklyn!"

"Oh, no!" the unhappy officer moaned. "Not *that* Miss Withers!"

"That Miss Withers," she snapped. "My good man, all we ask is that you find the real murderer, who must still

be on this train. He's wearing a Navy uniform . . ."

"Lady," the sergeant said sincerely, "you ask the impossible. The train is full of sailors. Grand Central is full of sailors."

"But this particular sailor," Malone put in, "is wearing the uniform of the man he killed. *There will be a slit in the back of the jumper* — just under the shoulder blade!"

"Where the knife went in," Miss Withers added. "Hurry, man! The train is stopping."

It might still have been a lost cause had not Lolly put in her five cents. "Don't listen to that old witch!" she cried. "Officer, you do your duty!"

The sergeant disliked being yelled at, even by blondes. "Hold all of 'em — her too," he ordered, and leaped out on the platform. He seized upon a railroad dick, who listened and then grabbed a telephone attached to a nearby pillar. Somewhere far off an alarm began to ring, and an emotionless voice spoke over the public address system . . .

In less than two minutes the vast labyrinth of Grand Central was alerted, and men in Navy uniforms were suddenly intercepted by polite but firm railroad detectives who sprang up out of nowhere. Only one of the sailors, a somewhat older man who was lugging a pet container that wasn't his, had any real difficulty. He alone had a narrow slit in the back of his jumper.

Bert Glick flung the leather case down the track and tried vainly to

run, but there was no place to go. The container flew open, and Precious scooted. Only a dumb Siamese cat, as Malone commented later, would have abandoned a lair that had a hundred grand tucked under its carpet of old newspapers.

"And to think that I spent the night within reach of that dough, and didn't grab my fee!" said Malone.

But it developed that there was a comfortable reward for the apprehension of Steve Larsen, alive or dead. Before John J. Malone took off for Chicago, he accepted an invitation for dinner at Miss Withers' modest little apartment on West 74th Street, arriving with four dozen roses. It was a good dinner, and Malone cheerfully put up with the screamed insults of Sinbad and the well-meant attentions of Talley, the apricot poodle. "Just as long as the cat stays lost!" he said.

"Yes, isn't it odd that nobody has seen hide nor hair of Precious! It's my idea that he's waxing fat in the caverns beneath Grand Central, preying on the rats who are rumored to flourish there. Would you care for another piece of pie, Mr. Malone?"

"All I really want," said the little lawyer hopefully, "is an introduction to your redheaded niece."

"Oh, yes, Joannie. Her husband played guard for Southern California, and he even made all-American," Miss Withers tactfully explained.

"On second thought, I'll settle for coffee," said John J. Malone.

Miss Withers sniffed, not unsympathetically.

THE IMPROMPTU MURDER

by ROY VICKERS

AT THE time he murdered Miss Wilkinson, Henry Daw was Mayor-elect of Swallowsbath, that quaint little town at the mouth of the Bynde. Daw knew before he committed the crime that suspicion would inevitably fasten upon himself. He was ready for it. Everything turned out according to plan — his plan. He had, in the vernacular, “got away with it.” He was beaten, not by a brilliant detective with a microscope, but by a totally unprecedented rainfall and a characteristic misunderstanding on the part of the Department of Dead Ends.

Henry Daw was thirty when in 1904 his father died and left him a flourishing practice as a solicitor. There was a suite of offices in the best part of Swallowsbath and one room in the commercial town of Callowsbath, nine miles away. Every Friday — which is market day — Daw would open his Callowsbath office at about seven in the morning, and there spend an industrious day with his clients, chiefly farmers, for whom he would act, when required, as judge, jury, and court of arbitration.

The practice, which was hardly affected by the succession, yielded the better part of £2000 a year net profit, so that young Daw, already a widower, found himself one of the most

important persons in Swallowsbath.

Among the clients of the firm was one he had never seen, a Miss Agnes Wilkinson, who lived in Manchester and very rarely came out of it. This woman — a stuffy, silly old maid, some ten years his senior — ruined this quite likable little man as surely as if she had been the traditional vampire. It was all done by a single false accusation.

The firm held a parcel of shares of a capital value of about £12,000, left to Miss Wilkinson by her father. In 1907 her income from these shares showed a slight falling off, whereupon she unreasonably accused the firm of robbing her. She rushed to a leading firm of London solicitors with instructions to salvage her fortune and wreak vengeance.

A fortnight later she was making handsome apologies and retransferring the conduct of her affairs to Henry Daw.

The idea of playing with his clients' money had never entered Henry Daw's head. But now — Miss Wilkinson had questioned his integrity, and had made a fool of herself. She had learned her lesson. Something amazing would have to happen before Agnes Wilkinson would ever trouble him again — provided she received her income regularly. That thought germinated for two years, then burst

into flower. He sold Miss Wilkinson's shares for about £12,000. This he "borrowed" without mentioning the fact to his client — and did extraordinarily well with it.

Then something amazing did happen. Europe, in fact, went to war. By October 1916 Henry Daw had lost the whole of his private capital, including £12,000 belonging to Miss Wilkinson.

He did not despair. This sort of thing had happened before, though not, he believed, to men of his integrity. The fault, he decided, must be placed at the door of the Kaiser, who would shortly be deposed for interfering with legitimate enterprise, after which there would be an inevitable revival of trade. In the meantime Miss Agnes Wilkinson would continue to receive her income, which he could provide out of his own earnings.

He was not even alarmed when he received a letter from Miss Wilkinson saying that, as she was passing his way next week, she would look in and have a chat. True, middle-aged spinsters who live in Manchester do not often "pass" a remote coastal town in autumn, especially in war-time. Still, there might be a simple explanation.

"Did I ever happen to mention a Miss Agnes Wilkinson?" he asked his sister. "She'll be in this part of the world next week, and I would like you to write and ask her to stay."

"Very well, Henry," answered his sister, Margery. Margery Daw (whose parents had shown her no mercy in the matter of her name) was a quiet

little mouse of a woman, much given to visiting among the poor. On the death of her father she had been glad to accept Henry's offer that she should keep house for him, and the arrangement had worked admirably. She had been happy until the last few weeks, when the approaching ordeal of acting as Mayoress was beginning to prey on her nerves.

For Henry, in his forty-second year, had been elected Mayor and would take office within a fortnight.

"It won't do any harm to butter her up a bit," continued Henry. "Have everything as nice as you can. The fact is, I have serious thoughts of asking her — well, you see, it wouldn't be a romantic affair; she's older than I am and not much to look at. It would be a marriage of convenience — if it ever comes off."

The proposal, at any rate, would come off if Miss Wilkinson smelled a rat.

Miss Wilkinson accepted the invitation with graceful eagerness for a single night. She would have to leave on the following morning for London.

The letter pleased him immensely. Miss Wilkinson, obviously, had smelled nothing.

"I don't know about this idea of my marrying again. You and I get along pretty comfortably together, don't we, See-saw?"

They might, indeed, have got along together for a great many more years. The fact that they did not do so might again be attributed to the Kaiser. The upheaval which that tur-

bulent spirit was believed to have caused necessitated the manufacture of munitions on a large scale.

"My brother," said Miss Wilkinson over lunch, "has been practically commanded by the King to enlarge his factory. Those metal fasteners, you know, he used to make — well, it seems that by making them a little different they can be used in the munitions. Not shots and shells, you know — nothing to do with gunpowder. It's just — munitions. He says he can turn over every penny he can lay hands on. He says I can double my money with him in six months. And it seems almost a duty, doesn't it, in war-time if the Government wants you to do it? So I thought I'd ask you what you think, Mr. Daw, about selling all my shares and putting the money with my brother?"

That meant arrest within a week — with a reasonable certainty of seven years' penal servitude to follow.

"I think it an excellent idea," said Henry Daw, who saw that opposition would be quite useless. He had landed himself in this hole by gambling. To get himself out of it he would have to gamble again.

After lunch Daw suggested a stroll into Swallowsbath. Miss Daw did not accompany them. They left the house together and turned up the little lane to the main road. The house was the better part of a mile from the center of the town. Its garden ran down to the river, and on either side Daw had bought fields. The pasture was too poor to let to a farmer — the fields

were waste ground — but he wished to secure the land against being built upon.

Daw was in high spirits. He chattered and laughed with his guest, in no way embarrassed by her rather fusty appearance. She wore a black cloak, a skirt that touched the ground, boots big and shapeless. Her unimpressive countenance was blurred by a spotted veil in the fashion of the time. They were an odd couple, certain to attract attention — a fact upon which Henry Daw was already building.

Here we must pause to admire the resourcefulness, the quick imagination, of this little country solicitor. The proposal of marriage would not now save him from having the impending mayoral chain torn from his shoulders. Nothing but a successful murder would do that. He planned it all in a few minutes.

Students of criminology have said that he was very lucky, that events played into his hand. The truth is that he himself made skillful use of his circumstances. He snatched at his circumstances as a man suddenly attacked will snatch at pieces of furniture to turn them into weapons. He used his house, his grounds, his known habits, his office in Callowsbath, Miss Wilkinson's boots, her cloak, her veil.

The walk was not without incident. An Army Service Corps motor lorry broke a shaft while descending a steep hill and would certainly have crushed Miss Wilkinson against a wall and killed her had not Daw pluckily

whisked her into safety. Too much has been made of this incident as illustrating the queer psychology of the murderer. It had nothing to do with psychology. If Miss Wilkinson were dead and known to be dead, her will, which left her property to her brother, would still send Henry Daw to prison. For his purpose Miss Wilkinson would have to be dead — *and not known to be dead.*

On their way back he stopped at a job master's on the outskirts of the town and addressed the proprietor.

"George, that lady who is staying with me" — he indicated Miss Wilkinson, who was standing, veiled, just out of earshot — "has to get to London early. She'll be leaving by the 6:15. Send a closed landau to my house at a quarter to six. Take her to the station, but don't let her pay. Between you and me, George, she's a client of a very good family, but not very well off."

Daw, as has been said, made use of his grounds, among other things. In the farther of his two fields there was, he knew, a solid slab of slate — six feet by three — weighing about three-quarters of a ton. It had once been a foot bridge over a gully, but the field had sunk and the slab of slate had for years served no purpose.

While Miss Wilkinson was taking tea with his sister, Daw, with a jack and a crowbar, lifted this slab of slate so that it stood on its side, vertically, resting against a tree. Then in the soil where the slab had lain he dug to a depth of three feet. He could dig no

deeper because at this depth his spade met solid rock. He was, in fact, digging a grave.

There was no fear of his being observed at these operations. The field was overgrown with nettles and a high hedge guarded it from the lane that ran to the main road.

When darkness fell, he left a spade and a large bucket in a handy position, then went back to the house to entertain his guest.

At ten o'clock, after an evening passed in a three-cornered game of halma, Miss Wilkinson signified that she wished to go to bed. She was, she explained, an indifferent sleeper, and would be very grateful if she could have writing materials taken to her room. She would like to write a few letters before turning in. Henry Daw promptly took up the writing materials himself, and removed the key of her bedroom door.

At the top of the stairs was his own bedroom, with a little dressing room opening off it. Then came his sister's room, and then, at the end of a short corridor, the spare room. The cook and housemaid slept on the floor above.

Shortly before midnight he went to Miss Wilkinson's room. It is known that she was bending over her correspondence, unaware of his presence, when he came behind her. He intended to suffocate her with a rubber sheet, but he used such violence that he broke her neck.

He then left the room, shutting the door behind him, and stood for five minutes or more in the corridor listen-

ing. He had expected his sister to hear something, and was ready for her. But the stillness of the house was unbroken, so he was able to proceed.

Miss Wilkinson, before sitting down to write, had taken off her outer garments and had used her cloak as a dressing gown. He removed the cloak, then carried the corpse to its grave. Here he covered it sufficiently with earth and dropped the slate slab back into its original position. This left him with a surplus of loose earth. By means of the bucket he carried this a distance of a dozen feet or so and dropped it in the river. By four o'clock he had finished. He crept back into the house, washed, then went to his room, undressed, and got into bed.

He lay in his own bed for about half an hour. Then he got up, went to the spare room, and spent a similar period in the bed that was to have been slept in by Miss Wilkinson.

It was now about 5:15. In half an hour the cab would be waiting at the end of the lane to take Miss Wilkinson to the station.

Miss Wilkinson's boots were a tight fit. The long skirt made up for any artistic deficiencies in his underwear, which was entirely masculine, even to a collar and tie, concealed by Miss Wilkinson's scarf. The bonnet, too, presented difficulties which were, however, largely overcome by a skillful use of the veil.

In the days of the war, civilians, if they traveled at all, traveled light — for porters were few and far between. Miss Wilkinson's luggage consisted

solely of a single basket-work case, held together by straps, of the kind that is known as a "degradation." Into this Henry Daw squeezed his everyday suit and a light overcoat.

All other oddments belonging to the late Miss Wilkinson were put into a drawer in his own bedroom and locked, subsequently being disposed of on his return home. He did not forget the letters she had been writing. Three were sealed in their envelopes. He picked these up and later posted them. There was nothing she could have written that could betray him. The unfinished letter he tore up and dropped into the wastepaper basket.

He left on the hall table a note to his sister, saying that Miss Wilkinson had decided to go back to London by the early train, and that they would travel as far as Callowsbath together.

He reached the end of the lane just as the cab was turning — a full hour, he it noted, before sunrise.

As Miss Wilkinson he was driven to the station. As Miss Wilkinson, with a very strong Lancashire accent, he bought a first-class single to London and entered the slip coach. As Miss Wilkinson, as soon as the train had started, he went to the lavatory and there resumed the outward trappings of Henry Daw.

The "degradation" he cut up and, together with the skirt, distributed about his person beneath his clothing, his overcoat effectively blurring any small bulges. The boots, bonnet, and cloak, he made into a brown-paper parcel tied with string.

At Huish Mertow, the halfway station, there got into the train a farmer, one of his clients. The farmer, as many local people do on these early and virtually empty trains, got into a third-class compartment of the slip coach, as this was nearest to his hand. Henry Daw was quick to seize his opportunity. He walked along the corridor, explained that he had an elderly lady client in a first-class compartment, then drew the conversation round to business. By the time the train reached Callowsbath, Henry Daw had given his advice on the legal point involved.

Arrived at Callowsbath Junction, he stayed on the platform until the slip coach had been shunted into position, and the train had left for London. Then, carrying the brown-paper parcel, he went to his office.

Here he unbuttoned himself and dealt with the "degradation" and other combustible evidence of the existence of Miss Wilkinson.

He was home again by half-past four in the afternoon — to find his household in a state of mild confusion.

"Miss Daw has been that queer all day, we didn't know what to do," explained the housemaid. "We thought we might send for Dr. Gardler, but you not being here we didn't know what to do. She said we was not to send for the doctor, sir, that she was quite well, only she wanted to rest, and her door being locked we didn't know what to do."

He hurried upstairs and tapped authoritatively on the door.

"Now, Margery, what's all this!"

She opened the door, but she went back to bed and declined to move.

"This is most alarming, See-saw! If you're feeling ill, we must have Gardler in."

"I don't want Gardler."

"Well, then, you must agree to take your food properly. By the way, did Martha give you the note I left? I met Miss Wilkinson on the stairs after you'd gone to bed and she said she'd been thinking it over and it would suit her much better to get to London earlier. Could she leave with me? You know what a funny old thing she is, and at the last moment —"

"I will have beef tea," said Margery, with more downright rudeness than she had ever exhibited before.

Daw was puzzled and disconcerted. There could be no doubt about the genuineness of his affection for his sister. He thought she might be delirious, and took her temperature. It proved to be below normal.

For three days Miss Daw kept to her bed. Then she got up and resumed her normal life.

During the three days events had followed their normal course. That is to say, George Wilkinson had reported the mysterious disappearance of his sister, and Scotland Yard, in the person of Detective-Inspector Barclay, had been sent to begin the search at Swallowsbath — with special reference to Henry Daw.

A woman goes to her solicitor, asks for her capital — and then mysteriously disappears.

"Then, at a quarter to six exactly, both of you got into the cab together to go to the station?" asked the detective.

"No. I thought I had made that clear. I walked to the station. Miss Wilkinson traveled alone in the cab."

"It seems a rather funny arrangement, Mr. Daw. Was there anything behind it, may I ask?"

"Possibly there was — I don't know. You must remember it was dark," answered Henry Daw, and then, although a Mayor-elect about to assume office, he permitted himself to wink at the detective.

"But you don't say a lady who was staying in your house would be afraid to get into a closed cab with you?"

"She wasn't afraid," laughed Henry Daw. "My dear sir, she was simpering and giggling, saying it was all very unconventional, and she hoped there'd be no talk. I tell you I wasn't having any, especially with a client, so I said I thought I had a cold coming on and would get rid of it by a brisk walk to the station. I nearly missed the train, too — jumped in after it had started. Of course, I may have exaggerated the whole thing in my own mind. But — the innocent, silly type of old maid is the most dangerous. They quite genuinely imagine things have happened — a man in my position may well find himself obliged to propose marriage or lose his practice. Look at that case at Peterborough the other day!"

There had been a case at Peterborough the other day — a case of al-

legations against a solicitor in respect of his client — and it came in very usefully. He had based his story on that case.

The explanation carried weight, curiously enough by its very thinness. The conventional murderer invariably over-proves everything. The conventional murderer would have created some very important reason why he should not ride in the cab.

The rest of his tale of Miss Wilkinson's movements was quite unshakable. The cabman, the booking clerk, and the station-master at Swallowsbath all saw her get into the train. No one saw Henry Daw jump into the train at the last minute, but no one was prepared to swear that he had not done so. This latter point was of no importance, because his former-client was talking to him on the train between Huish Mertow and Callowsbath — and the Huish Mertow station-master was quite certain that no one but the farmer had entered the train at that station. Moreover, he was seen to leave Callowsbath station at a time consistent with his having waited until the train containing his client had left.

Solicitors, after all, do not tend to murder their clients, even when asked to return capital. All suspicion ebbed away from Henry Daw, ebbed away to nothing. It was assumed that Miss Wilkinson must have left the train at some point between Callowsbath and London — for her ticket had not been collected at the terminus.

There the matter rested until the

following Whitsun, when the country was afflicted with an abnormally heavy rainfall.

For seven months Henry Daw performed the rather humdrum duties of Mayor at the tiny little town. At Whitsun would come the chance of showing his mayoral mettle — for on Whit Monday Lieutenant-General Sir Francis Garrold was to open the Lifeboat Institute, and the Mayor, of course, would make a speech.

The rain, a steady, heavy rain, began on Thursday. By Saturday morning it had beaten the local record and still showed no signs of stopping. The Bynde overflowed its banks.

The waters did not spare the home of the Mayor of Swallowsbath. By midday on Sunday part of his garden was under water, and it was clear that if the rain were to continue, the next high tide might threaten the house itself. The field wherein had reposed for the last seven months the remains of Miss Agnes Wilkinson was some seven feet below the roaring surface of the river, while the tree against which he had rested the slate slab had been torn down.

If this fact caused him any inward disturbance he showed nothing on the surface. He was preoccupied with the ceremony for the following day.

At this point it may be remarked that Dame Fortune is no stylist. Scotland Yard would have scorned the crudely melodramatic effect of interrupting the Mayor when he was making his speech.

It was during the speech of welcome

to the Lieutenant-General. There was a fairly large crowd on the quayside, liberally sprinkled with uniforms of men on leave and a battalion in training in the neighborhood. A space on the quay was roped off between the institute and the river. In this space was the Mayor, in ceremonial dress; beside him his sister, the Mayoress; behind them a screen of aldermen.

The Mayor was shouting his words because he wanted to make himself heard above the roar of the river. He was nearing his peroration when he became conscious of a noise other than that made by the river. It was made by the crowd, who were exclaiming and pressing to the waterside.

The Mayor was put out of his stride. He glanced at the river, but could see nothing except the branches of trees and the flotsam of the swollen river.

"It's a woman! It's a man! It's a woman, I tell you! She's dead!"

These cries reached him and spoiled the peroration. No one, in fact, knows whether he actually delivered it. The Mayor and the distinguished visitor himself were alike forgotten in the excitement, when two fishermen from the steps brought in with a boat hook the partly decomposed body that was floating in on the rising tide.

"It's a woman right enough. Been dead months by the look of her."

At these words a diversion was created by the fact that the Mayoress was seen to have fainted.

After lunch, after the General had driven away, the superintendent of the police approached the Mayor.

"That body, sir — it's in the mortuary, and, of course, there'll be the bother of identification. The doctor thinks it must be something under eight months dead. He says the neck's broken, but he didn't know whether that happened before or after drowning. It just occurred to me, sir — do you think it possible it might be that Miss Wilkinson? The time, according to the doctor is just about right."

"I must say it strikes me as very unlikely," said Henry Daw.

"Maybe, sir, but it's as well to make sure. I thought perhaps, if you would take a look at it, sir, you might be able to say one way or the other."

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that! I can't bear the sight of a dead body."

"Quite so, sir. But the body was in underclothing, and the doctor said it must have been very good, solid stuff — not the kind one of these pauper women would wear."

That, apparently, frightened Henry Daw into realizing that there might be danger in behaving unnaturally.

"Oh, very well then!" he said.

He tried to steel himself, but the effort was just a little too much for him. And so, quite unconsciously, he behaved as nine murderers out of ten — as police records show — behave in the presence of their victims. Henry Daw, in fact, closed his eyes, and then:

"It's not at all like her."

It was Henry Daw's first blunder. Even so, by all the rules of logical detection, it ought not to have endangered him. For when Scotland Yard rang up, after reading of the

finding of the body, the local superintendent was able to assure them that it was not the body of Miss Wilkinson.

Superintendent Tarrant, of the Department of Dead Ends, suggested that a detective be sent down. But the chief commissioner refused permission. Miss Wilkinson had been seen to enter the train bearing her away from Swallowsbath. It was not likely, therefore, that she could have been drowned in the Bynde.

So Superintendent Tarrant went down to Swallowsbath himself.

If Henry Daw had been a wholly callous brute, concerned only for his own skin, he would still have escaped. But Henry Daw was concerned for the safety of his sister. No words had passed between them, but Henry, if he had not known it at once, was now quite sure that Margery knew. By her silence she had become, legally, an accessory. And if anything were to come out, it might be very difficult to prove that she had done no more than keep silence.

More than a little shaken, he went to survey that which we are compelled to call the burial ground. Here he found that the tree had fallen across the slate slab and would have to be removed before a detailed examination could be made — which in the circumstances would be unsafe.

Superintendent Tarrant did not at once call on Henry Daw. He wired to George Wilkinson, asking him to come to Swallowsbath to view the corpse. He spent the evening collecting masses of information, not one

item of which pointed to Henry Daw as a possibly guilty person. He had, in short, nothing whatever against Daw, except an intuitive suspicion.

He called on Daw on the following afternoon within five minutes of the latter's returning home from his office. Wilkinson had already arrived in Swallowsbath, but the superintendent did not mention that.

"It was really Miss Daw I wanted to see," he explained. "My superiors want to make absolutely sure about the body that was washed up here. To cut a long story short, Mr. Daw, we would like your sister to view the body and give us her opinion."

That, thought Henry Daw, was not good enough. He scented suspicion. Margery would scent suspicion, and with this fellow hanging around with all the prestige of Scotland Yard behind him, she would lose her head.

"I don't think, Mr. Tarrant, that anyone could accuse me of wishing to obstruct the police. At the same time, I cannot dream of submitting my sister, a delicate woman, to such an ordeal. As you are probably aware, I myself have viewed the body. I know Miss Wilkinson a good deal better than my sister does. Surely your superiors can be satisfied with that."

"Perhaps they ought to be, Mr. Daw." The superintendent was thinking. And very soon he remembered what the records had told him about the behavior of nine murderers out of ten in the presence of their victims. "Let's see — when you viewed the

body, you were able to say at once that it was not like Miss Wilkinson."

"Exactly."

"When you looked at the face, what else did you see? Come, now, Mr. Daw, I admit that's a trap question. There's some — peculiarity — on that face, as a result of exposure, which no one could fail to notice. And which no one would be likely to guess either — if he hadn't seen it."

"You are suggesting that I did not look at the body properly?"

"Yes, I am suggesting that you kept your eyes shut the whole time."

"Well — what if I did? There's no earthly reason to suppose that it was Miss Wilkinson and I — I can't stand the sight of a dead body."

"Yet you told the superintendent that it was not like Miss Wilkinson."

"That was wrong of me. You must please remember that I was in a very nervy and agitated state. The ceremony of opening the Institute was a great strain on me."

"Well, it's not my affair, strictly speaking," said Superintendent Tarrant. "But it makes your evidence useless. So you see now we must have Miss Daw for the purpose. Perhaps you'll be good enough to ask her to come downstairs and see me."

Then Henry Daw made a rather magnificent sacrifice. He firmly believed that once the superintendent started work on his sister she would betray her knowledge — and that she would inevitably be charged.

"I am not going to have my sister dragged into it."

"Dragged into what?"

"I think you know, Mr. Tarrant."

The superintendent knew by now, of course. But he did not want a confession. He had his suspicions of Miss Daw. And a confession with a plea of "guilty" to follow would mean no trial. If Daw were to persist in confessing there would be no chance of catching his sister.

"There's no need to commit yourself, Mr. Daw. And I must warn —"

"Thanks, I know all that patter. I was a fool not to look at the body — I simply felt I couldn't. I'll tell you exactly what happened."

Henry Daw made a truthful confession of the murder — but the superintendent questioned and cross-questioned him as if Daw were defending himself.

He was asking a pointed question about the actual murder itself when the telephone rang.

It speaks much for the solicitor's nerve that he answered in a perfectly ordinary voice.

"It's a call for you, Mr. Tarrant. What about putting them off until we've finished?"

"I'd better see what it's about," said the superintendent, and took

up the receiver. It was the local superintendent who spoke.

"It's a washout, Mr. Tarrant," said the superintendent. "Mr. Wilkinson has just been to the mortuary with the doctor. It appears that Miss Wilkinson had an operation, but this corpse never has."

The superintendent replaced the receiver very slowly, very deliberately. He had come into that house believing that the body at the mortuary was that of Miss Wilkinson. Henry Daw apparently shared that belief. On the strength of that false belief Henry Daw had confessed.

All the careful rules for the questioning of suspected persons had been bombed by that fateful telephone message. There was, at the moment, nothing whatever against Henry Daw, in spite of his confession.

"After you had killed her — what did you do with the body?"

Henry Daw told him.

A couple of hours later the police had removed the fallen tree and lifted the stone slab. There they found the corpse of Miss Wilkinson.

That enabled them to charge Henry Daw on his own confession. The body in the mortuary was never identified.

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AUGUST DERLETH SELECTS . . .

Which are the twelve best detective short stories ever written? . . . You will recall that we asked a Blue Ribbon Jury of experts to select the crème de la crime, the best of all time, among all the detective shorts written in the past 109 years. This Bloodhound Board, this Inquest of Investigation, was composed of James Hilton, Howard Haycraft, John Dickson Carr, Anthony Boucher, Vincent Starrett, James Sandoe, August Derleth, Viola Brothers Shore, Lee Wright, Lew D. Feldman, Charles Honce, and your Editors — representing craftsmen, critics, and connoisseurs, editors, book-dealers, and readers. The final verdict of the symposium, arrived at by a point-system of voting, awarded the laurel wreaths of ratiocination to the following twelve tales — THE GOLDEN DOZEN:

The Hands of Mr. Ottermole	by Thomas Burke
The Purloined Letter	by Edgar A. Poe
The Red-Headed League	by A. Conan Doyle
The Avenging Chance	by Anthony Berkeley
The Absent-Minded Coterie	by Robert Barr
The Problem of Cell 13	by Jacques Futrèlle
The Oracle of the Dog	by G. K. Chesterton
Naboth's Vineyard	by Melville Davisson Post
The Gioconda Smile	by Aldous Huxley
The Yellow Slugs	by H. C. Bailey
The Genuine Tabard	by E. C. Bentley
Suspicion	by Dorothy L. Sayers

This month we bring you H. C. Bailey's "The Yellow Slugs," sponsored by August Derleth who, with the modesty of all the others on the panel, was "afraid that [he] hardly qualified as an expert of detective fiction." And they all meant it — honestly and humbly. But judge for yourself if August Derleth has not earned the right to express his literary and critical opinions.

Mr. Derleth is a phenomenon in our times. If we may borrow a string of Hollywood epithets, he is a man of vast energy, prodigious vitality, and colossal ambition. One of the most prolific writers we have ever known, he averages from 750,000 to 1,000,000 words per year, and his creative range is (to borrow another cinematic adjective) terrific. Mr. Derleth's work includes serious novels, poetry, biography, literary criticism, tales of horror, fantasy, and the weird, and last, but by no means least, detective stories. He has had, at the time of this writing, 56 books published, and

he has another 20 waiting publication; he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1938; he has been the literary editor of "The Capital Times" of Madison, Wisconsin, since 1941; he is the editor and owner of Arkham House (since 1939), of Mycroft & Moran and of Stanton & Lee (since 1945); he is the president of Associated Fantasy Publishers. His own publishing houses specialize in books of fantasy, and surely the volumes Mr. Derleth has issued are the finest of their kind being published in America today: they include the work of H. P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, A. E. Coppard, Ray Bradbury, William Hope Hodgson, Cynthia Asquith, J. Sheridan LeFanu — to mention only a few.

Oh, yes, August Derleth qualifies — in spades.

In nominating his own personal favorites among all the detective-crime short stories written since Poe, Mr. Derleth made only one qualification. Strangely enough, he was the only member of the jury to voice this particular reservation — yet we are sure that all the other experts feel exactly the same way. Mr. Derleth said: "I think my list of the twelve 'best' detective short stories of all time would vary from year to year." But he did set down the detectival dozen which, on rereadings, gave him the most pleasure, Here they are:

- The Yellow Slugs by H. C. Bailey
- The Purloined Letter by Edgar A. Poe
- The Speckled Band by A. Conan Doyle
- The Absent-Minded Coterie . . . by Robert Barr
- The Hammer of God by G. K. Chesterton
- The Doomdorf Mystery by Melville Davison Post
- The Genuine Tabard by E. C. Bentley
- The S. S. by M. P. Shiel
- The Puzzle Lock by R. Austin Freeman
- Tragedy at Brookbend Cottage . by Ernest Bramah
- The Case of the Late Pig by Margery Allingham
- The Door Key by Frederick Irving Anderson

H. C. Bailey's "The Yellow Slugs" was chosen by Dorothy L. Sayers for her smallest but in your Editors' opinion her best anthology — TALES OF DETECTION. Also, in your Editors' opinion, "The Yellow Slugs" is one of the two finest short stories H. C. Bailey ever wrote — the other is "The Long Dinner." And to quote another member of the panel, James Sandoe selected "The Yellow Slugs" as one of his all-time best because of "the delicacy of its nasty insinuation, and for its genuine pathos and for Reggie's rage."

THE YELLOW SLUGS

by H. C. BAILEY

THE BIG CAR closed up behind a florid funeral procession which held the middle of the road. On either side was a noisy congestion of lorries. Mr. Fortune sighed and closed his eyes.

When he looked out again he was passing the first carriage of another funeral, and saw beneath the driver's seat the white coffin of a baby. For the road served the popular cemetery of Blaney.

Two slow miles of dingy tall houses and cheap shops slid by, with vistas of meaner streets opening on either side. The car gathered speed across Blaney Common, an expanse of yellow turf and bare sand, turbid pond and scrubwood, and stopped at the brown pile of an old hospital.

Entering its carbolic odor, Mr. Fortune was met by Superintendent Bell. "Here I am," he moaned. "Why am I?"

"Well, she's still alive, sir," said Bell. "They both are."

Mr. Fortune was taken to a ward in which, secluded by a screen, a little girl lay asleep.

Her face had a babyish fatness, but in its pallor looked bloated and unhealthy. Though the close July air was oppressive and she was covered with heavy bedclothes, her skin showed no sign of heat and she slept still as death.

Reggie sat down beside her. His

hands moved gently within the bed. . . . He listened . . . he looked . . .

A nurse followed him to the door. "How old, do you think?" he murmured.

"That was puzzling me, sir. She's big enough for seven or eight, but all flabby. And when she came to she was talking almost baby talk. I suppose she may be only about five."

Reggie nodded. "Quite good, yes."

From the ward he passed to a small room where a nurse and a doctor stood together watching the one bed.

A boy lay in it, restless and making noises — inarticulate words mixed with moaning and whimpering.

The doctor lifted his eyebrows at Reggie. "Get that?" he whispered. "Still talking about hell. He came absolutely unstuck. I had to risk a shot of morphia. I ——" He broke off in apprehension as Reggie's round face hardened to a cold severity. But Reggie nodded and moved to the bed.

The boy tossed into stertorous sleep, one thin arm flung up above a tousled head. His sunken cheeks were flushed, and drops of sweat stood on the upper lip and the brow. Not a bad brow — not an uncomely face but for its look of hungry misery — not the face of a child — a face which had been the prey of emotions and thwarted desires.

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Reggie's careful hands worked over him . . . bits of the frail body were laid bare. . . . Reggie stood up, and still his face was set in ruthless, passionless determination.

Outside the door the doctor spoke nervously. "I hope you don't —"

"Morphia's all right," Reggie interrupted. "What do you make of him?"

"Well, Mr. Fortune, I wish you'd seen him at first." The doctor was uncomfortable beneath the cold insistence of a questioning stare. "He was right out of hand — a sort of hysterical fury. I should say he's quite abnormal. Neurotic lad, badly nourished — you can't tell what they won't do, that type."

"I can't. No. What age do you give him?"

"Now you've got me. To hear him raving, you'd think he was grown up, such a flow of language. Bible phrases and preaching. I'd say he was a twelve-year-old, but he might only be eight or ten. His development is all out of balance. He's unhealthy right through."

"Yes, that is so," Reggie murmured. "However. You ought to save him."

In a bare, grim waiting-room Reggie sat down with Superintendent Bell. "Well, sir?"

"Possible. Probable," Reggie told him. "On the evidence."

"Ah. Cruel, isn't it? I hate these child cases."

"Any more evidence?"

Bell stared at his hard calm gloomily. "I have. Plenty."

The story began with a small boy on the bank of one of the ponds on Blaney Common. That was some time ago. That was the first time anybody in authority had been aware of the existence of Eddie Hill. One of the keepers of the common made the discovery. The pond was one which children used for the sailing of toy boats. Eddie Hill had no boat, but he loitered round all the morning, watching the boats of other children. There was little wind, and one boat lay becalmed in the middle of the pond when the children had to go home to dinner.

An hour later the keeper saw Eddie Hill wade into the pond and run away. When the children came back from dinner there was no boat to be seen. Its small owner made weeping complaint to the keeper, who promised to keep his eyes open, and some days later found Eddie Hill and his little sister Bessie lurking among the gorse of the common with the stolen boat.

It was taken from them and their sin reported to their mother, who promised vengeance.

Their mother kept a little general shop. She had been there a dozen years — ever since she married her first husband. She was well liked and looked up to; a religious woman, regular chapel-goer, and all that. Her second husband, Brightman, was the same sort — hard-working, respectable man; been at the chapel longer than she had.

The day-school teachers had nothing against Eddie or the little girl. Eddie was rather more than usually

bright, but dreamy and careless; the girl a bit stodgy. Both of 'em rather less naughty than most.

"Know a lot, don't you?" Reggie murmured. "Got all this today?"

"No, this was all on record," Bell said. "Worked out for another business."

"Oh. Small boy and small girl already old offenders. Go on."

The other business was at the chapel Sunday school. Eddie Hill, as the most regular of its pupils, was allowed the privilege of tidying up at the end of the afternoon. On a Sunday in the spring the superintendent came in unexpectedly upon the process and found Eddie holding the money-box in which had been collected the contributions of the school to the chapel missionary society.

Eddie had no need nor right to handle the money-box. Moreover, on the bench beside him were pennies and a sixpence. Such wealth could not be his own. Only the teachers ever put in silver. Moreover, he confessed that he had extracted the money by rattling the box upside down, and his small sister wept for the sin.

The superintendent took him to the police station and charged him with theft.

"Virtuous man," Reggie murmured.

"It does seem a bit harsh," Bell said. "But they'd had suspicions about the money-box before. They'd been watching for something like this. Well, the boy's mother came and tried to beg him off, but of course the case had to go on. The boy came up

in the Juvenile Court — you know the way, Mr. Fortune; no sort of criminal atmosphere, magistrate talking like a father. He let the kid off with a lecture."

"Oh, yes. What did he say? Bringin' down mother's gray hairs in sorrow to the grave — wicked boy — goin' to the bad in this world and the next — anything about hell?"

"I couldn't tell you." Bell was shocked. "I heard he gave the boy a rare old talking to. I don't wonder. Pretty bad, wasn't it, the Sunday-school money-box? What makes you bring hell into it?"

"I didn't. The boy did. He was raving about hell today. Part of the evidence. I was only tracin' the origin."

"Ah. I don't like these children's cases," Bell said gloomily. "They don't seem really human sometimes. You get a twisted kind of child and he'll talk the most frightful stuff — and do it too. We can only go by acts, can we?"

"Yes. That's the way I'm goin'. Get on."

The sharp impatience of the tone made Bell look at him with some reproach. "All right, sir. The next thing is this morning's business. I gave you the outline of that on the phone. I've got the full details now. This is what it comes too. Eddie and his little sister were seen on the common; the keepers have got to keep an eye on him. He wandered about with her — he has a casual, drifting sort of way, like some of these queer kids do have — and they came to the big pond. That's

not a children's place at all; it's too deep; only dog bathing and fishing. There was nobody near; it was pretty early. Eddie and Bessie went along the bank, and a laborer who was scything thistles says the little girl was crying, and Eddie seemed to be scolding her, and then he fair chucked her in and went in with her. That's what it looked like to the keeper who was watchin' 'em. Him and the other chap, they nipped down and chucked the lifebuoy; got it right near, but Eddie didn't take hold of it; he was clutching the girl and sinking and coming up again. So the keeper went in to 'em and had trouble getting 'em out. The little girl was unconscious, and Eddie sort of fought him." Bell stopped and gave a look of inquiry, but Reggie said nothing, and his face showed neither opinion nor feeling. "Well, you know how it is with these rescues from the water," Bell went on. "People often seem to be fighting to drown themselves and it don't mean anything except fright. And about the boy throwing the girl in — that might have been just a bit of a row or play — it's happened often — not meant vicious at all; and then he'd panic, likely enough." Again Bell looked an anxious question at the cold, passionless face. "I mean to say, I wouldn't have bothered you with it, Mr. Fortune, but for the way the boy carried on when they got him out. There he was with his little sister unconscious, and the keeper doing artificial respiration, and he called out, 'Don't do it. Bessie's dead. She must

be dead.' And the keeper asked him, 'Do you want her dead, you little devil?' And he said, 'Yes, I do. I had to.' Then the laborer chap came back with help and they got hold of Eddie; he was raving, flinging himself about and screaming if she lived she'd only get like him and go to hell, so she must be dead. While they brought him along here he was sort of preaching to 'em bits of the Bible, and mad stuff about the wicked being sent to hell and tortures for 'em."

"Curious and interestin'," Reggie drawled. "Any particular torture?"

"I don't know. The whole thing pretty well gave these chaps the horrors. They didn't get all the boy's talk: I don't wonder. There was something about worms not dying, they told me. That almost turned 'em up. What do you make of it?"

"I should say it happened," Reggie said. "All of it. As stated."

"You feel sure he could have thrown that fat little girl in? He seemed to me such a weed."

"Yes. Quite a sound point. I took that point. Development of both children unhealthy. Girl wrongly nourished. Boy inadequately nourished. Boy's physique frail. However. He could have done it. Lots of nervous energy."

Bell drew in his breath. "You take it cool."

"Only way to take it," Reggie murmured, and Bell shifted uncomfortably. He has remarked since that he had seen Mr. Fortune look like that once or twice before — sort of in-

human, heartless, and inquisitive; but there it seemed all wrong, it didn't seem his way at all.

Reggie settled himself in his chair and spoke — so Bell has reported, and this is the only criticism which annoys Mr. Fortune — like a lecturer. "Several possibilities to be considered. The boy may be merely a precocious rascal. Having committed some iniquity which the little girl knew about, he tried to drown her to stop her giving him away. Common type of crime, committed by children as well as their elders."

"I know it is," Bell admitted. "But what could he have done that was worth murdering his sister?"

"I haven't the slightest idea. However. He did steal. Proved twice by independent evidence. Don't blame if you don't want. 'There, but for the grace of God, go I.' I agree. Quite rational to admit that consideration. We shall certainly want it. But he knew he was a thief; he knew it got him into trouble — that's fundamental."

"All right," said Bell gloomily. "We have to take it like that."

"Yes. No help. Attempt to murder sister may be connected with consciousness of sin. I should say it was. However. Other possibilities. He's a poor little mess of nerves; he's unsound, physically, mentally, spiritually. He may not have meant to murder her at all; may have got in a passion and not known what he was doing."

"Ah. That's more likely."

"You think so? Then why did he tell everybody he did mean to murder her?"

"Well, he was off his head, as you were saying. That's the best explanation of the whole thing. It's really the only explanation. Look at your first idea: he wanted to kill her so she couldn't tell about some crime he'd done. You get just the same question, why did he say he meant murder? He must know killing is worse than stealing. However you take the thing, you work back to his being off his head."

Reggie's eyelids drooped. "I was brought here to say he's mad. Yes. I gather that. You're a merciful man, Bell. Sorry not to satisfy your gentle nature. I could swear he's mentally abnormal. If that would do any good. I couldn't say he's mad. I don't know. I can find you mental experts who would give evidence either way."

"I know which a jury would believe," Bell grunted.

"Yes. So do I. Merciful people, juries. Like you. Not my job. I'm lookin' for the truth. One more possibility. The boy's motive was just what he said it was — to kill his little sister so she shouldn't get wicked and go to hell. That fits the other facts. He'd got into the way of stealing; it had been rubbed into him that he was doomed to hell. So, if he found her goin' the same way, he might think it best she should die while she was still clean."

"Well, if that isn't mad!" Bell exclaimed.

"Abnormal, yes. Mad — I wonder," Reggie murmured.

"But it's sheer crazy, sir. If he believed he was so wicked, the thing for him to do was to pull up and go straight, and see that she did too."

"Yes. That's common sense, isn't it?" A small, contemptuous smile lingered a moment on Reggie's stern face. "What's the use of common sense here? If he was like this — sure he was going to hell, sure she was bein' driven there too — kind of virtuous for him to kill her to save her. Kind of rational. Desperately rational. Ever know any children, Bell? Some of 'em do believe what they're taught. Some of 'em take it seriously. Abnormal, as you say. Eddie Hill is abnormal." He turned and looked full at Bell, his blue eyes dark in the failing light. "Aged twelve or so — too bad to live — or too good. Pleasant case."

Bell moved uneasily. "These things do make you feel queer," he grunted. "What it all comes to though — we mean much the same — the boy ought to be in a home."

"A home!" Reggie's voice went up, and he laughed. "Yes. Official home for mentally defective. Yes. We can do that. I daresay we shall." He stood up and walked to the window and looked out at the dusk. "These children had a home of their own. And a mother. What's she doing about 'em?"

"She's been here, half off her head, poor thing," said Bell. "She wouldn't believe the boy meant any harm. She told me he couldn't, he was so fond of

his sister. She said it must have been accident."

"Quite natural and motherly. Yes. But not adequate. Because it wasn't accident, whatever it was. We'd better go and see mother."

"If you like," Bell grunted.

"I don't like," Reggie mumbled. "I don't like anything. I'm not here to do what I like." And they went.

Shutters were up at the little shop which was the home of Eddie Hill, and still bore in faded paint his father's name. No light showed in the windows above. Bell rapped on the door, and they waited in vain. He moved to a house door close beside the shop. "Try this. This may be theirs too," he said, and knocked.

After a minute it was opened by a woman who said nothing, but stared at them. From somewhere inside came the sound of a man's voice, talking fervently.

The light of the street lamp showed her of full figure, in neat black, and a face which was still pretty but distressed.

"You remember me, Mrs. Brightman," said Bell. "I'm Superintendent Bell."

"I know." She was breathless. "What's the matter? Are they — is Eddie — what's happened?"

"They're doing all right. I just want a little talk with you."

"Oh, they're all right. Praise God!" She turned; she called out: "Matthew, Matthew dear, they're all right."

The man's voice went on talking with the same fervor.

"I'll come in, please," said Bell.

"Yes, do. Thank you kindly. Mr. Brightman would like to see you. We were just asking mercy."

She led the way along a passage, shining clean, to a room behind the shop. There a man was on his knees praying, and most of the prayer was texts: "And we shall sing of mercy in the morning. Amen. Amen."

He stood up before them, tall and gaunt, a bearded man with melancholy eyes. He turned to his wife. "What is it, my dear?"

"It's about the children, Matthew." His wife came and took his arm. "It's the police superintendent, I told you."

The man sucked in his breath. "Ay, ay. Please sit down. They must sit down, Florrie." There was a fluster of setting chairs. "This is kind, sir. What can you tell us tonight?"

"Doin' well. Both of 'em," Reggie said.

"There's our answer, Florrie," the man said, and smiled, and his sombre eyes glowed. "There's our prayers answered."

"Yes. I think they're going to live," said Reggie. "But that's not the only thing that matters. We have to ask how it was they were nearly drowned."

"It was an accident. It must have been," the woman cried. "I'm sure Eddie wouldn't — he never would, would he, Matthew?"

"I won't believe it," Brightman answered quickly.

"Quite natural you should feel like that," Reggie nodded. "However. We have to deal with the facts."

"You must do what you think right, sir." Brightman bent his head.

"Yes, I will. Yes. Been rather a naughty boy, hasn't he?"

Brightman looked at his wife's miserable face and turned to them again. "The police know," he said. "He has been a thief — twice he has been a thief — but little things. There is mercy, surely there is mercy for repentance. If his life is spared, he should not be lost; we must believe that."

"I do," Reggie murmured. "Any special reason why he should have been a thief?"

Brightman shook his head. "He's always had a good home, I'm sure," the woman moaned. She looked round her room, which was ugly and shabby, but all in the cleanest order.

"What can I say?" Brightman shook his head. "We've always done our best for him. There's no telling how temptation comes, sir, and it's strong and the little ones are weak."

"That is so. Yes. How much pocket money did they have?"

"Eddie has had his twopence a week since he was ten," Brightman answered proudly. "And Bessie has her penny."

"I see. And did anything happen this morning which upset Bessie or Eddie?"

"Nothing at all, sir. Nothing that I know." Brightman turned to his wife. "They went off quite happy, didn't they?"

"Yes, of course they did," she said eagerly. "They always loved to have a day on the common. They took

their lunch, and they went running as happy as happy — and then this.”

“Well, well,” Reggie stood up. “Oh. By the way. Has Eddie — or Bessie — ever stolen anything at home here?”

Brightman started and stared at him. “That’s not fair, sir. That’s not a right thing to ask. There isn’t stealing between little ones and their mother and father.”

“No. As you say. No,” Reggie murmured. “Good night. You’ll hear how they get on. Good night.”

“Thank you, sir. We shall be anxious to hear. Good night, sir,” said Brightman, and Mrs. Brightman showed them out with tearful gratitude. As the door was opened, Brightman called: “Florrie! Don’t bolt it. Mrs. Wiven hasn’t come back.”

“I know. I know,” she answered, and bade them good night.

A few paces away, Reggie stopped and looked back at the shuttered shop and the dark windows. “Well, well. What does the professional mind make of all that?”

“Just what you’d expect, wasn’t it?” Bell grunted.

“Yes. Absolutely. Poor struggling shopkeepers, earnestly religious, keeping the old house like a new pin. All in accordance with the evidence.” He sniffed the air. “Dank old house.”

“General shop smell. All sorts of things mixed up.”

“As you say. There were. And there would be. Nothing you couldn’t have guessed before we went. Except that Mrs. Wiven is expected — whoever Mrs. Wiven is.”

“I don’t know. Sounds like a lodger.”

“Yes, that is so. Which would make another resident in the home of Eddie and Bessie. However. She’s not come back yet. So we can go home. The end of a beastly day. And tomorrow’s another one. I’ll be out to see the children in the morning. Oh, my Lord! Those children.” His hand gripped Bell’s arm.

By eight o’clock in the morning he was at the bedside of Bessie Hill — an achievement of stupendous but useless energy, for she did not wake till half-past.

Then he took charge. A responsible position, which he interpreted as administering cups of warm milk and bread and butter. She consumed them eagerly.

“Good girl.” Reggie wiped her mouth. “Feelin’ better?”

She sighed and snuggled down, and gazed at him with large eyes. “Umm. Who are you?”

“They call me Mr. Fortune. Is it nice here?”

“Umm. Comfy.” The big eyes were puzzled. “Where is it?”

“Blaney Hospital. People brought you here after you were in the pond. Do you remember?”

She shook her head. “Is Eddie here?”

“Oh, yes. Eddie’s asleep. He’s all right. Were you cross with Eddie?”

Tears came into the brown eyes. “Eddie was cross wiv me,” the child whimpered. “I wasn’t. Eddie said must go into ve water. I didn’t want. But Eddie was so cross. Love Eddie.”

"Yes. Little girl." Reggie stroked her hair. "Eddie shouldn't have been cross. Just a little girl. But Eddie isn't often cross, is he?"

"No. Love Eddie. Eddie's dear."

"Why was he cross yesterday?"

The brown eyes opened wider. "I was naughty. It was Mrs. Wiven. Old Mrs. Wiven. I did go up to her room. I didn't fink she was there. Sometimes is sweeties. But she was vere. She scolded me. She said I was little fief. We was all fiefs. And Eddie took me away and oh, he was so cross; he said I would be wicked and must not be. I aren't. I aren't. Eddie was all funny and angry, and said not to be like him and go to hell, and then he did take me into pond wiv him. I didn't want. I didn't want!"

"No. Of course not. No. Poor little girl. Eddie didn't understand."

"Is Eddie still cross wiv me?"

"Oh, no. No. Eddie won't be cross any more. Nobody's cross, little girl." Reggie bent over her. "Everybody's going to be kind now. You only have to be quiet and happy. That's all."

"Oooh." She gazed up at him. "Tell Eddie I'm sorry."

"Yes. I'll tell him." Reggie kissed her hand and turned away.

The nurse met him at the door. "Did she wake in the night?" he whispered.

"Yes, sir, asking for Eddie. She's a darling, isn't she? She makes me cry, talking like that of him."

"That won't do any harm," Reggie said, and his face hardened. "But you mustn't talk about him."

He went to the room where Eddie lay. The doctor was there, and turned from the bedside to confer with him. "Not too bad. He's put in a long sleep. Quite quiet since he waked. Very thirsty. Taken milk with a dash of coffee nicely. But he's rather flat."

Reggie sat down by the bed. The boy lay very still. His thin face was white. Only his eyes moved to look at Reggie, so little open, their pupils so small that they seemed all greenish-gray. He gave no sign of recognition, or feeling, or intelligence. Reggie put a hand under the clothes and found him cold and damp.

"Well, young man, does anything hurt you now?"

"I'm awful tired," the boy said.

"Yes. I know. But that's going away."

"No, it isn't; it's worse. I didn't ought to have waked up." The faint voice was drearily peevish. "I didn't want to. It's no good. I thought I was dead. And it was good being dead."

"Was it?" Reggie said sharply.

The boy gave a quivering cry. "Yes, it was!" His face was distorted with fear and wonder. "I thought it would be so dreadful and it was all quiet and nice, and then I wasn't dead, I was alive and everything's awful again. I've got to go on still."

"What's awful in going on?" said Reggie. "Bessie wants you. Bessie sent you her love. She's gettin' well quick."

"Bessie? Bessie's here in bed like I am?"

"Of course she is. Only much happier than you are."

The boy began to sob.

"Why do you cry about that?" Reggie said. "She's got to be happy. Boys and girls have to be happy. That's what they're for. You didn't want Bessie to die."

"I did. You know I did," the boy sobbed.

"I know you jumped in the pond with her. That was silly. But you'd got rather excited, hadn't you? What was it all about?"

"They'll tell you," the boy muttered.

"Who will?"

"The keepers, the p'lice, the magistrate, everybody. I'm wicked. I'm a thief. I can't help it. And I didn't want Bessie to be wicked too."

"Of course you didn't. And she isn't. What ever made you think she was?"

"But she was." The boy's voice was shrill. "She went to Mrs. Wiven's room. She was looking for pennies. I know she was. She'd seen me. And Mrs. Wiven said we were all thieves. So I had to."

"Oh, no, you hadn't. And you didn't. You see? Things don't happen like that."

"Yes, they do. There's hell. Where their worms don't die."

The doctor made a muttered exclamation.

Reggie's hand held firm at the boy's as he moved and writhed. "There's God too," he murmured. "God's kind. Bessie's not going to be wicked. You don't have to be wicked. That's what's come of it all. Somebody's

holding you up now." His hand pressed. "Feel?" The boy's lips parted; he looked up in awe. "Yes. Like that. You'll see me again and again. Now goodbye. Think about me. I'm thinking about you." . . .

Outside, in the corridor, the doctor spoke: "I say, Mr. Fortune, you got him then. That was the stuff. I thought you were driving hard before. Sorry I spoke."

"I was," Reggie frowned. His round face was again of a ruthless severity. "Difficult matter to play with souls," he mumbled. "We've got to." He looked under drooping eyelids. "Know the name of the keeper who saw the attempted drowning? Fawkes? Thanks."

He left the hospital and walked across the common.

The turf was parched and yellow, worn away on either side. Reggie described the brown coat of a keeper, made for him, and was directed to Fawkes.

Fawkes was a slow-speaking, slow-thinking old soldier, but he knew his own mind.

There was no doubt in it that Eddie had tried to kill Bessie, no indignation, no surprise. Chewing his words, he gave judgment. He had known Eddie's sort, lots of 'em. 'Igh-strung, wanting the earth, kicking up behind and before 'cause they couldn't get it. He didn't mind 'em. Rather 'ave 'em than young 'uns like sheep. But you 'ad to dress 'em down proper.

That business of the boat? Yes, Eddie pinched that all right. Smart kid; you'd got to 'and him that. And

yet not so smart. Silly, lying up with it on the common; just the way to get nabbed. Ought to 'ave took it 'ome and sailed it over at Wymond Park. Never been spotted then. But 'im and 'is sister, they made a reg'lar den up in the gorse. Always knew where to look for 'em. Silly. Why, they was up there yesterday, loafing round, before 'e did 'is drowning act.

"Take you there? I can, if you like."

Reggie did like. They went up the brown slope of the common to a tangle of gorse and bramble over small sand-hills.

"There you are." The keeper pointed his stick to a patch of loose sand in a hollow. "That's young Eddie's funk-'ole."

Reggie came to the place. The sand had been scooped up by small hands into a low wall round a space which was decked out with pebbles, yellow petals of gorse, and white petals of bramble.

"Ain't that just like 'em!" The keeper was angrily triumphant. "They know they didn't ought to pick the flowers."

Reggie did not answer. He surveyed the pretense of a garden and looked beyond. "Oh, my Lord!" he muttered. On the ground lay a woman's bag.

"'Allo, 'allo." The keeper snorted. "They've pinched something else."

Reggie took out his handkerchief, put his hand in it, and thus picked up the bag. He looked about him; he wandered to and fro, going delicately,

examining the confusion of small foot-marks, farther and farther away.

"Been all round, ain't they?" the keeper greeted him on his return.

"That is so. Yes," Reggie mumbled and looked at him with searching eyes. "Had any notice of a bag lost or stolen?"

"Not as I've 'eard. Better ask the 'ead keeper. 'E'll be up at the top wood about now."

The wood was a thicket of birch and crab-apple and thorn. As they came near, they saw on its verge the head keeper and two other men who were not in the brown coats of authority. One of these was Superintendent Bell.

"I tried to catch you at the hospital, Mr. Fortune," he said. "But I suppose you've heard about Mrs. Wiven?"

"Oh. The Mrs. Wiven who hadn't come back," Reggie said slowly. "No. I haven't heard anything."

"I thought you must have, by your being out here on the common. Well, she didn't come back at all. This morning Brightman turned up at the station very rattled to ask if they had any news of his lodger, Mrs. Wiven. She never came in last night, and he thought she must have had an accident or something. She'd been lodging with them for years. Old lady, fixed in her habits. Never went anywhere, that he knew of, except to chapel and for a cup o' tea with some of her chapel friends, and none of them had seen her. These fine summer days she'd take her food out and sit on the common here all day long.

She went off yesterday morning with sandwiches and a vacuum flask of tea and her knitting. Often she wouldn't come home till it was getting dark. They didn't think much of her being late; sometimes she went in and had a bit o' supper with a friend. She had her key, and they left the door unbolted, like we heard, and went to bed, being worn out with the worry of the kids. But when Mrs. Brightman took up her cup of tea this morning and found she wasn't in her room, Brightman came running round to the station. Queer business, eh?"

"Yes. Nasty business. Further you go the nastier."

Bell looked at him curiously and walked him away from the keeper. "You feel it that way? So do I. Could you tell me what you were looking for out here — as you didn't know she was missing?"

"Oh, yes. I came to verify the reports of Eddie's performances."

"Ah! Have you found any error?"

"No. I should say everything happened as stated."

"The boy's going to get well?"

"It could be. If he gets the chance."

"Poor little beggar," Bell grunted. "What do you really think about him?"

"Clever child, ambitious child, imaginative child. What children ought to be — twisted askew."

"Kind of perverted, you mean."

"That is so. Yes. However. Question now is, not what I think of the chances of Eddie's soul, but what's been happening. Evidence inadequate,

curious, and nasty. I went up to the private lair of Eddie and Bessie. Same where he was caught with the stolen boat. I found this." He showed Bell the woman's bag.

"My oath!" Bell muttered, and took it from him gingerly. "You wrapped it up! Thinkin' there might be fingerprints."

"Yes. Probably are. They might even be useful."

"And you went looking for this — not knowing the woman was missing?"

"Wasn't lookin' for it," Reggie snapped. "I was lookin' for anything there might be. Found a little pretense of a garden they'd played at — and this."

"Ah, but you heard last night about Mrs. Wiven, and this morning you go up where Eddie hides what he's stolen. Don't that mean you made sure there was something fishy? You see when we're blind, Mr. Fortune."

"Oh, no. I don't see. I knew more than you did. Little Bessie told me this morning she was in Mrs. Wiven's room yesterday, privily and by stealth, and Mrs. Wiven caught her and called her a thief, and said they were all thieves. I should think little Bessie may have meant to be a thief. Which would agree with Eddie's effort to drown her so she should die good and honest. But I don't see my way."

"All crazy, isn't it?" Bell grunted.

"Yes. The effort of Eddie is an incalculable factor. However. You'd better look at the bag."

Bell opened it with cautious fingers. A smell of peppermint came out.

Within was a paper bag of peppermint lozenges, two unclean handkerchiefs marked E. W., an empty envelope addressed to Mrs. Wiven, a bottle of soda-mint tablets, and some keys.

"Evidence that it is the bag of the missing Mrs. Wiven strong," Reggie murmured. He peered into it. "But no money. Not a penny." He looked up at Bell with that cold, ruthless curiosity which Bell always talks about in discussing the case. "Stealin' is the recurrin' motive. You notice that?"

"I do." Bell stared at him. "You take it cool, Mr. Fortune."

"No use feelin' feelings," Reggie drawled. "We have to go on. We want the truth, whatever it is."

"Well, all right, I know," Bell said gloomily. "They're searching the common for her. That's why I came out here. They knew her. She did sit about here in summer." He went back to the head keeper and conferred again.

Reggie purveyed himself a deck-chair, and therein sat extended and lit a pipe and closed his eyes.

"Mr. Fortune!" Bell stood over him. His lips emitted a stream of smoke. No other part of him moved. "They've found her. I suppose you expected that."

"Yes. Obvious possibility. Probable possibility." It has been remarked that Mr. Fortune has a singular capacity for becoming erect from a supine position. A professor of animal morphology once delivered a lecture

upon him — after a hospital dinner — as the highest type of the invertebrates. He stood up from the deck-chair in one undulating motion. "Well, well. Where is the new fact?"

Bell took him into the wood. No grass grew in it. Where the sandy soil was not bare, dead leaves made a carpet. Under the crab-apple trees, between the thornbrakes, were nooks obviously much used by pairs of lovers. By one of these, not far from the whale-back edge of rising ground which was the wood's end, some men stood together.

On the gray sand there lay a woman's body. She was small; she was dressed in a coat and skirt of dark gray cloth and a black and white blouse. The hat on her gray hair was pulled to one side, giving her a look of absurd frivolity in ghastly contrast to the distortion of her pallid face. Her lips were closely compressed and almost white. The dead eyes stared up at the trees with dilated pupils.

Reggie walked round the body, going delicately.

Beside the body was a raffia bag which held some knitting, a vacuum flask, and an opened packet of sandwiches.

Reggie's discursive eyes looked at them and looked again at the dead face, but not for long. He was more interested in the woman's skirt. He bent over that, examined it from side to side, and turned away and went on prowling farther and farther away, and as he went he scraped at the dry sand here and there.

When he came back to the body, his lips were curved in a grim, mirthless smile. He looked at Bell. "Photographer," he mumbled.

"Sent a man to phone, sir."

Reggie continued to look at him. "Have you? Why have you?"

"Just routine." Bell was startled.

"Oh. Only that. Well; well." Reggie knelt down by the body. His hands went to the woman's mouth.

. . . He took something from his pocket and forced the mouth open and looked in. . . . He closed the mouth again, and sat down on his heels and contemplated the dead woman with dreamy curiosity. . . . He opened her blouse. Upon the underclothes was a dark stain. He bent over that and smelt it; he drew the clothes from her chest.

"No wound, is there?" Bell muttered.

"Oh, no. No." Reggie put back the clothes and stood up and went to the flask and the sandwiches. He pulled the bread of an unfinished sandwich apart, looked at it, and put it down. He took the flask and shook it. It was not full. He poured some of the contents into its cup.

"Tea, eh?" said Bell. "Strong tea."

"Yes. It would be," Reggie murmured. He tasted it and spat, and poured what was in the cup back into the flask and corked it again.

"There you are. Cause of death, poisoning by oxalic acid or binoxalate of potassium — probably the latter — commonly called salts of lemon. And we shall find some in that awful tea.

We shall also find it in the body. Tongue and mouth, white, contracted, eroded. Time of death, probably round about twenty-four hours ago. No certainty."

"My oath! It's too near certainty for my liking," Bell muttered.

"Is it?" Reggie's eyelids drooped. "Wasn't thinkin' about what you'd like. Other interestin' facts converge."

"They do!" Bell glowered at him. "One of the commonest kinds of poisoning, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes. Salts of lemon very popular."

"Anybody can get it."

"As you say. Removes stains, cleans brass and whatnot. Also quickly fatal."

"This boy Eddie could have got some easy."

"That is so. Yes. Lethal dose for a penny or two anywhere."

"Well, then — look at it!"

"I have," Reggie murmured. "Weird case. Ghastly case."

"Gives me the horrors," said Bell. "The old lady comes out here to spend the day as usual, and somebody's put a spot of poison in her drop o' tea and she dies; and her bag's stolen, and found without a farthing where the boy Eddie hides his loot. And about the time the old lady's dying, Eddie tries to drown his sister. What are you going to make of it? What can you make of it? It was a poison any kid could get hold of. One of 'em must have poisoned her to steal her little bit o' money. But the girl's not much more than a baby. It must have been

Eddie that did it — and that goes with the rest of his doings. He's got the habit of stealing. But his little sister saw something of it, knew too much, so he put up this drowning to stop her tongue — and then, when she was saved, made up this tale about killing her to keep her honest. Devilish, isn't it? And when you find a child playing the devil — my oath! But it is devilish clever — his tale would put the stealing and all the rest on the baby. And we can't prove anything else. She's too little to be able to get it clear, and he's made himself out driven wild by her goings-on. If a child's really wicked, he beats you."

"Yes, that is so," Reggie drawled. "Rather excited, aren't you? Emotions are not useful in investigation. Prejudice the mind into exaggeratin' facts and ignorin' other facts. Both fallacies exhibited in your argument. You mustn't ignore what Bessie did say — that she went into Mrs. Wiven's room yesterday morning and Mrs. Wiven caught her. I shouldn't wonder if you found Bessie's fingerprints on that bag."

"My Lord!" Bell stared at him. "It's the nastiest case I ever had."

"Not nice, no. Discoverin' the possibilities of corruption of the soul. However. We haven't finished yet. Other interestin' facts have been ignored by Superintendent Bell. Hallo!" Several men were approaching briskly. "Is this your photographer and other experts?"

"That's right."

"Very swift and efficient." Reggie

went to meet them. "Now then. Give your attention to the lady's skirt. Look." He indicated a shining streak across the dark stuff. "Bring that out."

"Can do, sir," the photographer said, and fell to work.

Reggie turned to Bell. "They'll go over the whole of her for fingerprints, what? Then she can be taken to the mortuary."

"Very good," Bell said, and turned away to give the orders, but, having given them, stood still to stare at the thin glistening streak on the skirt.

Reggie came quietly to his elbow. "You do notice that? Well, well." Bell looked at him with a puzzled frown and was met for the first time in this case by a small, satisfied smile which further bewildered him. He bent again to pore over the streak. "It's all right." Reggie's voice was soothing. "That's on record now. Come on." Linking arms, he drew Bell away from the photographers and the fingerprint men. "Well? What does the higher intelligence make of the line on the skirt?"

"I don't know. I can't make out why you think so much of it."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap!" Reggie moaned. "Crucial fact. Decisive fact." He led Bell on out of the wood and across the common, and at a respectful distance Bell's two personal satellites followed.

"Decisive, eh?" Bell frowned. "It was just a smear of something to me. You mean salts of lemon would leave a shiny stain?"

"Oh, no. Wouldn't shine at all."

"Has she been sick on her skirt?"

"Not there. No. Smear wasn't human material."

"Well, I thought it wasn't. What are you thinking of?"

"I did think of what Eddie said — where their worm dieth not."

"My God!" Bell muttered. "Worms?" He gave a shudder. "I don't get you at all, sir. It sounds mad."

"No. Connection is sort of desperate rational. I told you Eddie was like that. However. Speakin' scientifically, not a worm, but a slug. That streak was a slug's trail."

"Oh. I see." Bell was much relieved. "Now you say so, it did look like that. The sort o' slime a slug leaves behind. It does dry shiny, of course."

"You have noticed that?" Reggie admired him. "Splendid!"

Bell was not pleased. "I have seen slugs before," he grunted. "But what is there to make a fuss about? I grant you, it's nasty to think of a slug crawling over the woman as she lay there dead. That don't mean anything, though. Just what you'd expect, with the body being all night in the wood."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap!" Reggie moaned. "You mustn't talk like that. Shakes confidence in the police force. Distressin' mixture of inadequate observation and fallacious reasonin'."

"Thank you. I don't know what's wrong with it." Bell was irritated.

"Oh, my Bell! You shock me. Think again. Your general principle's

all right. Slugs do come out at night. Slugs like the dark. That's a general truth which has its particular application. But you fail to observe the conditions. The body was in a wood with no herbage on the ground: and the ground was a light dry sand. These are not conditions which attract the slug. I should have been much surprised if I'd found any slugs there, or their tracks. But I looked for 'em — which you didn't, Bell. I'm always careful. And there wasn't a trace. No. I can't let you off. A slug had crawled over her skirt, leavin' his slime from side to side. And yet his slime didn't go beyond her skirt on to the ground anywhere. How do you suppose he managed that? Miracle — by a slug. I don't believe in miracles if I can help it."

"You go beyond me," said Bell uneasily. "You grasp the whole thing while I'm only getting bits. What do you make of it all?"

"Oh, my Bell!" Reggie reproached him. "Quite clear. When the slug walked over her, she wasn't lying where she was found."

"Is that all?" Bell grunted. "I dare say. She might have had her dose, and felt queer and lay down, and then moved on to die where we found her. Nothing queer in that, is there?"

"Yes. Several things very queer. It could be. Oxalic poisoning might lay her out and still let her drag herself somewhere else to die. Not likely she'd take care to bring her flask and her sandwiches with her. Still less likely she'd lie long enough for a slug

to walk over her and then recover enough to move somewhere else — and choose to move into the wood, where she wouldn't be seen. Why should she? She'd try for help if she could try for anything. And, finally, most unlikely she'd find any place here with slugs about. Look at it; it's all arid and sandy and burnt up by the summer. No. Quite unconvincin' explanation. The useful slug got onto her somewhere else."

"Then you mean to say she was poisoned some other place, and brought here dead?" Bell frowned. "It's all very well. You make it sound reasonable. But would you like to try this slug argument on a jury? They'd never stand for it, if you ask me. It's all too clever."

"You think so?" Reggie murmured. "Well, well. Then it does give variety to the case. We haven't been very clever so far. However. Study to improve. There is further evidence. She'd been sick. Common symptom of oxalic poisoning. But she'd been sick on her underclothes and not on her outside clothes. That's very difficult. Think about it. Even juries can be made to think sometimes. Even coroners, which is very hard. Even judges. I've done it in my time, simple as I am. I might do it again. Yes, I might. With the aid of the active and intelligent police force. Come on."

"What do you want to do?"

"Oh, my Bell! I want to call on Mr. and Mrs. Brightman. We need their collaboration."

"All right. I don't mind trying 'em," Bell agreed gloomily. "We've got to find out all about the old woman somehow. We don't really know anything yet."

"I wouldn't say that. No," Reggie mumbled. "However. One moment."

They had come to the edge of the common by the hospital, where his car waited. He went across to it and spoke to his chauffeur.

"Just calmin' Sam," he apologized on his return. "He gets peevish when forgotten. Come on."

They arrived again at the little general shop. Its unshuttered window now enticed the public with a meagre array of canned goods and cartons which had been there some time. The door was shut but not fastened. Opening it rang a bell. They went in, and found the shop empty.

Mrs. Brightman came from the room behind, wiping red arms and hands on her apron. Her plump face, which was tired and sweating, quivered alarm at the sight of them. "Oh, it's you!" she cried. "What is it?"

"Your children are doing well," said Reggie. "Thought I'd better let you know that."

She stared at him, and tears came into her eyes. "Praise God!" she gasped. "Thank you, sir."

"No. You don't have to thank me. I'm just doin' my job."

But again she thanked him, and went on nervously: "Have you heard anything of Mrs. Wiven?"

"I want to have a little talk about her. Is Mr. Brightman in?"

"No, he isn't, not just now. Have you got any news of her, sir?"

"Yes. There is some news. Sorry Mr. Brightman's out. Where's he gone?"

"Down to the yard, sir."

"Out at the back here?"

"No. No. Down at his own yard."

"Oh. He has a business of his own?"

"Yes, sir, a little business. Furniture dealing. Second-hand furniture."

"I see. Well, well. We could get one of the neighbors to run down and fetch him, what?"

"That's the way," Bell nodded.

"What's the address, ma'am?"

She swallowed. "It's just round the corner. Smith's Buildings. Anybody would tell you. But he might be out on a job, you know; I couldn't say."

Bell strode out, and the messenger he sent was one of his satellites.

"Well, while we're waitin', we might come into your nice little room," Reggie suggested. "There's one or two things you can tell me."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure, anything as I can, I'll be glad. Will you come through, please?" She lifted the flap of the counter for him, she opened the curtained glass door of the room behind. It was still in exact order, but she had to apologize for it. "I'm sorry we're all in a mess. I'm behindhand with my cleaning, having this dreadful trouble with the children and being so worried I can't get on. I don't half know what I'm doing, and then poor Mrs. Wiven being lost——" She stopped, breathless. "What is it about Mrs. Wiven, sir?"

"Not good news," Reggie said. "Nobody will see Mrs. Wiven alive again."

The full face grew pale beneath its sweat, the eyes stood out. "She's dead! Oh, the poor soul! But how do you know? How was it?"

"She's been found dead on the common."

Mrs. Brightman stared at him: her mouth came open and shook; she flung her apron over her head and bent and was convulsed with sobbing.

"Fond of her, were you?" Reggie sympathized.

A muffled voice informed him that she was a dear old lady.

"Was she? Yes. But I wanted to ask you about the children. What time did they go out yesterday?" Still sobbing under her apron, Mrs. Brightman seemed not to hear. "Yesterday morning," Reggie insisted. "You must remember. What time was it when Eddie and Bessie went out?"

After a moment the apron was pulled down from a swollen, tearful face. "What time?" she repeated looking at her lap and wiping her eyes. "I don't know exactly, sir. Just after breakfast. Might be somewheres about nine o'clock."

"Yes, it might be," Reggie murmured. "They were pulled out of the pond about ten."

"I suppose so," she whimpered. "What's it got to do with Mrs. Wiven?"

"You don't see any connection?"

She stared at him. "How could there be?"

The shop-door bell rang, and she started up to answer it. She found Bell in the shop. "Oh, have you found Mr. Brightman?" she cried.

"No, not yet. Where's Mr. Fortune?"

Reggie called to him, "Come on, Bell," and she brought him into the back room and stood looking from one to the other. "So Mr. Brightman wasn't in his yard?"

"No sir. Nobody there."

"Well, well," Reggie murmured.

"But I told you he might have gone off on a job."

"You did say so. Yes," Reggie murmured. "However. I was asking about the children. Before they went out yesterday — Bessie got into trouble with Mrs. Wiven, didn't she?"

The woman looked down.

"You didn't tell us that last night," Reggie said.

"I didn't want to. I didn't see as it mattered. And I didn't want to say anything against Bessie. She's my baby." Her eyes were streaming.

"Bessie told me," said Reggie.

"Bessie confessed! Oh, it's all too dreadful. The baby! I don't know why this was to come on us. I brought 'em up to be good. I have. And she was such a darling baby. But it's God's will."

"Yes. What did happen?"

"Mrs. Wiven was always hard on the children. She never had a child herself, poor thing. Bessie got into her room, and Mrs. Wiven caught her and said she was prying and stealing like Eddie. I don't know what Bessie

was doing there. Children will do such, whatever you do. And there was Bessie crying and Eddie all wild. He does get so out of himself. I packed 'em off, and I told Mrs. Wiven it wasn't nothing to be so cross about, and she got quite nice again. She was a dear with me and Brightman."

"And when did Mrs. Wiven go out?" said Reggie.

"It must have been soon after. She liked her days on the common."

"Oh, yes. That's clear." Reggie stood up and looked out at the yard, where some washing was hung out to dry. "What was Mrs. Wiven wearing yesterday?"

"Let me see —" Mrs. Brightman was surprised by the turn in the conversation. "I don't rightly remember — she had on her dark coat and skirt. She always liked to be nicely dressed when she went." Under the frown of this mental effort swollen eyes blinked at him. "But you said she'd been found. You know what she had on."

"Yes. When she was on the common. Before she got there — what was she wearing?"

Mrs. Brightman's mouth opened and shut.

"I mean, when she caught Bessie in her room. What was she wearing then?"

"The same — she wouldn't have her coat on — I don't know as I remember — but the same — she knew she was going out — she'd dress for it — she wouldn't ever dress twice in a morning."

"Wouldn't she? She didn't have

that overall on?" Reggie pointed to a dark garment hanging on the line in the yard which stretched from house to shed.

"No, she didn't, I'm sure. That was in the dirty clothes."

"But you had to wash it today. Well, well. Now we want to have a look at Mrs. Wiven's room."

"If you like. Of course, nothing's been done. It's all untidy."

But Mrs. Wiven's room was primly neat and as clean as the shining passage and stairs. The paint had been worn thin by much washing, the paper was so faded that its rosebud pattern merged into a uniform pinkish gray. An old fur rug by the bedside, a square of threadbare carpet under the rickety round table in the middle of the room, were the only coverings of the scoured floor. The table had one cane chair beside it, and there was a small basket chair by the empty grate — nothing else in the room but the iron bedstead and a combination of chest of drawers, dressing-table, and washstand.

"Is this her own furniture?" Reggie asked.

"No, sir, she hadn't anything. We had to furnish it for her."

"Quite poor, was she?"

"I don't really know how she managed. And, of course, we didn't ever press her; you couldn't. She had her savings, I suppose."

"No relations?"

"No, sir. She was left quite alone. That was really why she came to us, she was that lonely. She'd say to me she did so want a home, till we took

her. When she was feeling down, she used to cry and tell me she didn't know what would become of her. Of course, we wouldn't ever have let her want, poor dear. But it's my belief her bit of money was running out."

Reggie gazed about the room. On the walls were many cards with texts.

"Mr. Brightman put up the good words for her," Mrs. Brightman explained.

"In my Father's house are many mansions." Reggie read one out slowly.

Mrs. Brightman sobbed, "Ah, she's gone there now. She's happy."

Bell was moving from one to the other of the cupboards beside the grate. Nothing was in them but clothes. He went on to the dressing-table. "She don't seem to have any papers. Only this." He lifted a cash-box, and money rattled in it.

"I couldn't say, I'm sure," Mrs. Brightman whimpered.

Reggie stood by the table. "Did she have her meals up here?" he asked.

Mrs. Brightman thought about that. "Mostly she didn't. She liked to sit down with us."

Reggie fingered the table-cloth, pulled it off, and looked at the cracked veneer beneath. He stooped, felt the strip of old carpet under the table, drew it back. On the boards beneath was a patch of damp.

Mrs. Brightman came nearer. "Well there!" she said. "That comes of my not doing out the room. She must have had an accident with her slops and never told me."

Reggie did not answer. He wandered round the room, stopped by the window a moment, and turned to the door.

"I'm taking this cash-box, ma'am," said Bell.

"If you think right ——" Mrs. Brightman drew back. "It's not for me to say — I don't mind, myself." She looked from one to the other. "Will that be all, then?"

"Nothing more here." Reggie opened the door.

As they went downstairs, the shop bell rang again, and she hurried on to answer it. The two men returned to the room behind the shop.

"Poor old woman," Bell grunted. "You can see what sort of a life she was having — that dingy room and her money running out — I wouldn't wonder if she committed suicide."

"Wouldn't be wonderful. No," Reggie murmured. "Shut up."

From the shop came a man's voice, lazy and genial. "Good afternoon, mum. I want a bit o' salts o' lemon. About two penn'orth would do me."

There was a mutter from Mrs. Brightman. "We don't keep it."

"What? They told me I'd be sure to get it 'ere. Run out of it, 'ave you?"

"We never did keep it," Mrs. Brightman said. "Whoever told you we did?"

"All right, all right. Keep your hair on, missus. Where can I get it?"

"How should I know? I don't rightly know what it is."

"Don't you? Sorry I spoke. Used for cleaning, you know."

Bell glowered at Reggie, for the humorous cockney voice was the voice of his chauffeur. But the cold severity of Reggie's round face gave no sign.

"We don't use it, nor we don't keep it, nor any chemist's stuff," Mrs. Brightman was answering.

"Oh, good day!" The bell rang again as the shop door closed.

Mrs. Brightman came back. "Running in and out of the shop all day with silly people," she panted. She looked from one to the other, questioning, afraid.

"I was wonderin'," Reggie murmured. "Did Mrs. Wiven have her meals with you yesterday — or in her room?"

"Down here." The swollen eyes looked at him and looked away. "She did usual, I told you. She liked to."

"And which was the last meal she ever had?"

Mrs. Brightman suppressed a cry. "You do say things! Breakfast was the last she had here. She took out a bit o' lunch and tea."

"Yes. When was that put ready?"

"I had it done first thing, knowing she meant to get out — and she always liked to start early. It was there on the sideboard waiting at breakfast."

"Then it was ready before the children went out? Before she had her quarrel with Bessie?"

Mrs. Brightman swallowed. "So it was."

"Oh. Thank you. Rather strong, the tea in her flask," Reggie mumbled.

"She always had it fairly strong. I'm just the same myself."

"Convenient," Reggie said. "Now you'll take me down into the cellar, Mrs. Brightman."

"What?" She drew back so hastily that she was brought up by the wall. "The cellar?" Her eyes seemed to stand out more than ever, so they stared at him, the whites of them more widely bloodshot. With an unsteady hand she thrust back the hair from her sweating brow. "The cellar? There's nothing in the cellar."

"You think not?" Reggie smiled. "Come down and see."

She gave a moaning cry; she stumbled away to the door at the back, and opened it, and stood holding by the door-post, looking out to the paved yard.

From the shed in it appeared Brightman's bearded face. "Were you looking for me, dearie?" he asked, and brought his lank shape into sight.

She made a gesture to him; she went to meet him and muttered: "Matthew! They're asking me to take 'em down to the cellar."

"Well, to be sure!" Brightman gave Reggie and Bell a glance of melancholy, pitying surprise. "I don't see any reason in that." He held her up, he stroked her and gently remonstrated. "But there's no reason they shouldn't go to the cellar if they want to, Florrie. We ain't to stand in the way of anything as the police think right. We ain't got anything to hide."

An inarticulate quavering sound came from her.

"That's all right, my dearie, that's all right," Brightman soothed her.

"Is it?" Bell growled. "So you've been here all the time, Mr. Brightman. While she sent us to look for you down at your own place. Why didn't you show up before?"

"I've only just come in, sir," Brightman said quietly. "I came in by the back. I was just putting things to rights in the wash-house. The wife's been so pushed. I didn't know you gentlemen were here. You're searching all the premises, are you? I'm agreeable. I'm sure it's in order, if you say so. But I don't know what you're looking for."

"Mrs. Brightman will show us," said Reggie, and grasped her arm.

"Don't, don't," she wailed.

"You mustn't be foolish, dearie," said Brightman. "You know there's nothing in the cellar. Show the gentlemen if they want. I'll go with you."

"Got a torch, Bell?" said Reggie.

"I have." Bell went back into the room. "And here's a lamp, too." He lit it.

Reggie drew the shaking woman through the room into the passage. "That's the door to your cellar. Open it. Come on."

Bell held the lamp overhead behind them. Reggie led her stumbling down the stairs, and Brightman followed.

A musty, dank smell came about them. The lamplight showed a large cellar of brick walls and an earth floor. There was in it a small heap of coal, some sacks and packing-cases and barrels, but most of the dim space was empty. The light glistened on damp.

"Clay soil," Reggie murmured, and smiled at Brightman. "Yes. That was indicated."

"I don't understand you, sir," said Brightman.

"No. You don't. Torch, Bell." He took it and flashed its beam about the cellar. "Oh, yes." He turned to Bell. With a finger he indicated the shining tracks of slugs. "You see?"

"I do," Bell muttered.

Reggie moved to and fro. He stooped. He took out his pocketbook and from it a piece of paper, and with that scraped something from a barrel side, something from the clay floor.

Standing up, he moved the ray of the torch from place to place, held it steady at last to make a circle of light on the ground beneath the steps. "There," he said, and Mrs. Brightman screamed. "Yes. I know. That's where you put her. Look, Bell." His finger pointed to a slug's trail which came into the circle of light, stopped, and went on again at another part of the circle. "It didn't jump. They don't."

He swung round upon Mrs. Brightman. He held out to her the piece of paper cupped in his hand. On it lay two yellow slugs.

She flung herself back, crying loathing and fear.

"Really, gentlemen, really now," Brightman stammered. "This isn't right. This isn't proper. You've no call to frighten a poor woman so. Come away now Florrie, dearie."

"Where are you going?" Reggie murmured. She did not go. Her eyes

were set on the two yellow slugs. "Where their worm dieth not," Reggie said slowly.

She broke out in screams of hysterical laughter; she tore herself from Brightman, and reeled and fell down writhing and yelling.

"So that is that, Mr. Brightman." Reggie turned to him.

"You're a wicked soul!" Brightman whined. "My poor dearie!" He fell on his knees by her; he began to pray forgiveness for her sins.

"My oath!" Bell muttered, and ran up the steps shouting to his men.

Some time afterwards Reggie left. On the other side of the street, aloof from the gaping, gossiping crowd, superior and placid, his chauffeur smoked a cigarette. It was thrown away; the chauffeur followed him, fell into step beside him. "Did I manage all right, sir?"

"You did. Very neat. Very effective. We are good at destruction. Efficient incinerators. Humble function. Other justification for existence, doubtful. However. Study to improve. What we want now is a toy shop."

"Sir?" Sam was puzzled.

"I said a toy shop," Reggie complained. "A good toy shop. Quick."

The last of the sunlight was shining into the little room at the hospital where Eddie Hill lay. Upon his bed stood part of a bridge built of strips of metal bolted together, a bridge of grand design. He and Reggie were working on the central span.

There was a tap at the door, a murmur from Reggie, and the nurse brought in Bell. He stood looking at Reggie with reproachful surprise. "So that's what you're doing."

"Yes. Something useful at last." Reggie sighed. "Well, well. We'll have to call this a day, young man. Mustn't get yourself tired."

"I'm not tired," the boy protested eagerly. "I'm not, really."

"No. Of course not. Ever so much better. But there's another day tomorrow. And you have a big job. Must keep fit to go on with it."

"All right." The boy lay back, looked at his bridge, looked wistfully at Reggie. "I can keep this here, can I, sir?"

"Rather. On the table by the bed. So it'll be there when you wake. Nice, making things, isn't it? Yes. You're going to make a lot now. Goodbye. Jolly, tomorrow, what? Goodbye." He went out with Bell. "Now what's the matter with you?" he complained.

"Well, I had to have a word with you, sir. This isn't going to be so easy. I thought I'd get you at the mortuary doing the post-mortem."

"Minor matter. Simple matter. Only the dead buryin' their dead. The boy was urgent."

"I'm not saying you're not right," said Bell wearily. "But it is a tangle of a case. The divisional surgeon reports Mrs. Brightman's mad."

"Yes. I agree. What about it?"

"Seemed to me you pretty well drove her to it. Those slugs — oh, my Lord."

"Got you, did it? It rather got me. I'd heard Eddie talk of 'the worm that dieth not.' I should say he'd seen that cellar. Dreamed of it. However. I didn't drive the woman mad. She'd been mad some time. Not medically mad. Not legally mad. But morally. That was the work of our Mr. Brightman. I only clarified the situation. He almost sent the boy the same way. That's been stopped. That isn't going to happen now. That's the main issue. And we win on it. Not too bad. But rather a grim day. Virtue has gone out of me. My dear chap!" He took Bell's arm affectionately. "You're tucked up too."

"I don't mind owning I've had enough," said Bell. "This sort of thing tells me I'm not as young as I was. And it's all a tangle yet."

"My dear chap! Oh, my dear chap!" Reggie murmured. "Empty, aren't we? Come on. Come home with me."

While Sam drove them back, he declined to talk. He stretched in the corner of the car and closed his eyes, and bade Bell do the same. While they ate a deviled sole and an entrecôte Elsie, he discussed the qualities of his cook, and of the Romanée which they drank, and argued bitterly (though he shared it) that the cheese offered in deference to Bell's taste, a bland Stilton, was an insult to the raspberries, the dish of which he emptied.

But when they were established in big chairs in his library, with brandy for Bell and seltzer for himself, and both pipes were lit, "Did you say a tangle?" he murmured. "Oh, no. Not

now. The rest is only routine for your young men and the lawyers. It'll work out quite easy. You can see it all. When Mrs. Brightman was left a widow with her little shop, the pious Brightman pounced on her and mastered her. The little shop was only a little living. Brightman wanted more. Children were kept very short — they might fade out, they might go to the bad — either way the devout Brightman would be relieved of their keep; and meanwhile it was pleasant making 'em believe they were wicked. Old Mrs. Wiven was brought in as a lodger — not out of charity as the wretched Mrs. Brightman was trained to say; she must have had a bit of money. Your young men will be able to trace that. And they'll find Brightman got it out of her and used it to set up his second-hand furniture business. Heard of that sort of thing before, what?"

"I should say I have," Bell grunted. "My Lord, how often! The widow that falls for a pious brute — the old woman lodger with a bit of money."

"Oh, yes. Dreary old game. And then the abnormal variations began. Pious bullyin' and starvin' didn't turn the boy into a criminal idiot. He has a mind. He has an imagination, poor child. Mrs. Wiven didn't give herself up to Brightman like his miserable wife. She had a temper. So the old game went wrong. Mrs. Wiven took to fussin' about her money. As indicated by Bessie. Mrs. Wiven was going to be very awkward. Your young men will have to look about and get evidence she'd been grumbling. Quite easy.

Lots of gossip will be goin'. Some of it true. Most of it useful at the trial."

Bell frowned. "Fighting with the gloves off, aren't you?"

"Oh, no. No. Quite fair. We have to fight the case without the children. I'm not going to have Eddie put in the witness-box, to be tortured about his mad mother helpin' murder. That might break him up forever. And he's been tortured enough. The brute Brightman isn't going to hurt him any more. The children won't be givin' evidence. I'll get half the College of Physicians to certify they're not fit, if they're asked for. But that's not goin' to leave Mr. Brightman any way out. Now then. Things bein' thus, Brightman had his motive to murder Mrs. Wiven. If he didn't stop her mouth she'd have him in jail. Being a clever fellow, he saw that Eddie's record of stealin' would be very useful. By the way — notice that queer little incident, Bessie bein' caught pilferin' by Mrs. Wiven yesterday morning? Brightman may have fixed that up for another black mark against the children. I wonder. But it didn't go right. He must have had a jolt when Mrs. Wiven called out they were all thieves. Kind of compellin' immediate action. His plan would have been all ready, of course — salts of lemon in her favorite strong tea; a man don't think of an efficient way of poisonin' all of a sudden. And then the incalculable Eddie intervened. Reaction of Mrs. Wiven's explosion on him, a sort of divine command to save his sister from hell by seeing she died innocent.

When Brightman had the news of that effort at drowning, he took it as a godsend. Hear him thanking heaven? Boy who was wicked enough to kill a little sister was wicked enough for anything. Mr. Brightman read his title clear to mansions in the skies. And Mrs. Wiven was promptly given her cup o' tea. She was sick in her room, sick on her overall and on her underclothes. Evidence for all that conclusive. Remember the damp floor. I should say Mrs. Brightman had another swab at that today. She has a craze about cleaning. We saw that. Feels she never can get clean, poor wretch. Well. Mrs. Wiven died. Oxalic poisoning generally kills quick. I hope it did. They hid the body in the cellar. Plan was clever. Take the body out in the quiet of the night and dump it on the common with a flask of poisoned tea — put her bag in Eddie's den. All clear for the intelligent police. Devil of a boy poisoned the old lady to steal her money, and was drownin' his little sister so she shouldn't tell on him. That's what you thought, wasn't it? Yes. Well-made plan. It stood up against us last night."

"You did think there was something queer," Bell said.

"I did," Reggie sighed. "Physical smell. Damp musty smell. Probably the cellar. And the Brightmans didn't smell nice spiritually. However. Lack of confidence in myself. And I have no imagination. I ought to have waited and watched. My error. My grave error. Well. It was a clever plan.

But Brightman was rather busted. That may account for his errors. Fatal errors. Omission to remove the soiled underclothes when the messed-up overall was taken off. Failure to allow for the habits of *limax flavus*."

"What's that?" said Bell.

"Official name of yellow slug — cellar slug. The final, damning evidence. I never found any reason for the existence of slugs before. However. To round it off — when you look into Mr. Brightman's furniture business, you'll find that he has a van, or the use of one. You must prove it was used last night. That's all. Quite simple now. But a wearin' case." He gazed at Bell with large, solemn eyes. "His wife! He'd schooled her thorough. Ever hear anything more miserably appealing than her on her dear babies and poor old Mrs. Wiven? No. Took a lot of breakin' down."

"Ah. You were fierce."

"Oh, no. No." Reggie sighed. "I was bein' merciful. She couldn't be saved. My job was to save the children. And she — if that brute hadn't twisted her, she'd have done anything to save 'em too. She'd been a decent soul once. No. She won't be giving evidence against me."

"Why, how should she?" Bell gaped.

"I was thinkin' of the day of judgment," Reggie murmured. "Well, well. Post-mortem in the morning. Simple straight job. Then I'll be at the hospital if you want me. Have to finish Eddie's bridge. And then we're going to build a ship. He's keen on ships."

FANG TOI MAKES A BARGAIN

by LEMUEL DE BRA

LOUIE HOP, hired hatchet-man for the Sui Bin tong, paused at the edge of the tar and gravel roof and looked about him. It was midnight. Below lay San Francisco's Chinatown, its dim lights gleaming like a handful of tawdry jewels strewn on black velvet. It was a place of strange silences and sudden barbaric noises; but here, on this roof, there was no sound. The hatchet-man could not even hear the weird sing-song of the players in Fang Toi's gambling shop on the alley corner.

From beneath his black satin blouse, Louie Hop took a strong, light rope. With deft fingers he fastened it over the cornice, grasped the rope with both hands, and swung off. Swiftly and silently he slid down the rope to the window of Wah Lee, the rich dealer in silks and carved woods.

The window was dark. Like one who, through much practice, knows how to do such things, Louie Hop rested a slippered foot on the ledge, clung to the rope with one hand while with the other he grasped hold of the lower sash. Very quietly he began raising it.

At once something rolled off the sill and struck the floor with a sharp, penetrating sound. Louie Hop knew what it was — a chop stick that the bribed servant had put there so that the window would not come down

far enough to lock. Instantly the hatchet-man let go of the window, and swung to one side out of sight, holding himself there against the brick wall by pressing both feet against the window frame. A moment later, hearing no sound within the room, he got back on the sill, raised the sash, held the heavy Cantonese drapery to one side, and climbed in.

Again Louie Hop paused and listened. With all his careful scheming, things had not worked out just as he had planned. Wah Lee, instead of playing *pai gow* at Fang Toi's until midnight as usual, had left an hour earlier. Louie Hop had planned to get into the merchant's room before he arrived; but Wah Lee's early departure made it necessary for him to wait until he felt sure the merchant was in his room and asleep. But now, as he listened, he heard no sound of breathing. Apparently, Wah Lee had not come to his room.

Made bolder by this, the hatchet-man stepped forward and, looking up, groped around in the dark for the electric light cord he knew was in the middle of the room. He had not quite reached the spot where he expected to find it when, suddenly, the globes burst into brilliant light. Startled, and half-blinded, Louie Hop sprang back. His right hand darted beneath his blouse.

"*Pah lok!*" whispered a voice in harsh and threatening Cantonese.

The hatchet-man's hand came away from his automatic. He stood motionless; but his usually masklike face could not hide his astonishment. The man who faced him over the gleaming automatic was not the big-stomached merchant; it was a tall man in funereal black. Over the yellow silk handkerchief that masked the lower part of the man's face, slant black eyes stared back at Louie Hop in amazement that turned slowly to a look of understanding.

"So — the tong!" breathed the masked man.

Louie Hop's eyes narrowed and struck fire.

"Yes," answered Louie Hop calmly. "And what are you doing here masked like a thief — Fang Toi?"

Fang Toi, the gambler, betrayed no emotion at being recognized. For a moment he stared unblinkingly at the hatchet-man; then he moved his hands in a peculiar gesture, slipped the automatic beneath his blouse, and removed the mask.

"*Tsau kom lok!*" he said, his thin lips twisting in a sardonic smile; "let it be so! I think we understand each other."

The hatchet-man shifted his gaze quickly. He looked around the room. Just back of Fang Toi was a doorway covered with beaded portieres; on the left of this door was a teakwood desk and a shelf of books; on the right, a large embroidered stand-screen partly concealed a bed.

"Where is Wah Lee?" whispered the hatchet-man.

Fang Toi smiled. He motioned to a spot near the window. Looking around, Louie Hop saw a small table with a stone jar and bowls.

"You need not put a mat over your voice," said the gambler. "No one will hear us. Let us have a bowl of Wah Lee's *ng ka py* while we discuss this peculiar situation."

The hatchet-man followed Fang Toi to the table, accepted a bowl of the fiery liquor, and touched it to his lips.

"It is very funny, don't you think?" went on Fang Toi.

"I don't understand you," replied Louie Hop surlily. "I came here — with a message from the tong."

"Exactly!" mocked Fang Toi. "I have already observed that you carry the — ah — message under your blouse beneath your right arm. However, that is not your fault. The tong hatchet is an awkward thing to conceal."

Louie Hop scowled blackly, but he held silent.

"As for me," went on the gambler, "I came here to settle a private matter with Wah Lee. I got in — how does not matter. While my business with him is strictly personal, I do not mind telling you that Wah Lee has not only refused to pay his gambling debts, but he has done me great injury by accusing me openly of dishonest playing."

"That is false, of course," said Louie Hop with fine sarcasm.

"You miss the point," smiled Fang Toi. "It is because Wah Lee knew it was true that it became necessary for me to seek means of persuading him to remain silent."

"You couldn't persuade him to do anything he didn't want to do, or dissuade him from doing anything he set out to do," remarked the hatchet-man. "Don't I know? The tong tried everything before they — sent for me."

"I understand that; nevertheless, I came here to see what I could do. I was much surprised when I heard you at the window. I did a great deal of thinking while you were getting into this room. I had just heard someone outside in the hall or I would have fled. That being inadvisable, I decided to let you come in and then learn your object. Now that I know it, let us get down to business."

"Yes, be quick about it."

"Louie Hop, you have been hired by the tong to kill Wah Lee. The safety of my business, the saving of my face, demands that I slay Wah Lee. Obviously, both of us cannot carry out our intention. The question is, shall one yield to the other; or shall we make a bargain?"

Louie Hop regarded the other sullenly. He seemed to feel that he was no match for the gambler.

"If I yield to you I lose a nice profit," said the hatchet-man. "Moreover, you are known as the craftiest and sharpest bargainer in Chinatown. I do not like to deal with you."

Fang Toi inclined his head. "And

if I yield to you, you will silence the tongue of my enemy, Wah Lee; but gossips will say that I was a coward, that I hired a tong hatchet-man to slay him."

Louie Hop did not deny this. Fang Toi moved out a stool and sat down. He motioned to the hatchet-man to be seated.

"Let us not waste words or time over the matter," went on Fang Toi. "You have been guaranteed three thousand dollars to —"

"Only two thousand," corrected Louie Hop.

"Two thousand," echoed the gambler, and quickly bowed his head over his bowl to hide his smile. "For that you take the chance of being arrested by the foreign devil police for murder, of being kept in a foreign devil prison while lawyers and magistrates fight until all your money is gone, after which you will be taken out some morning to be hung."

"Yes," admitted the hatchet-man. "But you are taking the same chances."

"Not at all. The police are angry with the tongs. They are blaming all killings on them. I would not even be suspected."

"Then what have I to gain by bargaining with you?"

Fang Toi picked up his empty bowl, and set it down again.

"You showed yourself to someone before coming here?"

"Certainly. To Gar Ling, the druggist. I shall go back —"

"How long since you left Gar Ling's?"

"About as long as it takes one to repeat *The Oath of the Bloody Wine*."

"Ah! And now you propose to wait here until Wah Lee comes. You might have to wait a long time. When you get back to Gar Ling's you might find it difficult to explain your absence. Now supposing you go back there at once? Then you could easily prove, if necessary, that Wah Lee was killed while you were in Gar Ling's place."

"How could I do that?"

"Must I speak in the phrases of a child? Well, then, listen! Give me the hatchet of the tong. Give me also your promise to pay me \$1,600. Then you hasten back to Gar Ling's. I will remain and do what you planned to do. Tomorrow, when everybody knows that Wah Lee has been found with the tong hatchet buried in his skull, you can collect your two thousand and pay me my share—sixteen hundred."

"I understand," said the hatchet-man. "But you get sixteen hundred; that is too much."

"Too much when I take all the risk and the tong has agreed to pay you two thousand for the same work? *Kuai!* Come! Is it a bargain?"

Louie Hop was silent a moment.

"I will give you a thousand," he said finally.

"A thousand for killing Wah Lee, for taking all the chances of going to prison, while you keep a thousand and do nothing, take no risks? Am I a fool, Louie Hop?"

"I will give you twelve hundred."

Fang Toi shook his head. "That is not enough; but since you are determined to waste time bargaining, I will give you my final price. I will accept fifteen hundred. That gives you five hundred with no risk. But if you do not accept quickly, Wah Lee may come and spoil everything."

"Very well," said Louie Hop after a moment's consideration.

Fang Toi's hand was steady as he refilled the bowls. "Then it is done," he said; and the two bowls touched.

Louie Hop set down his empty bowl. From beneath his blouse he drew a heavy object and laid it on the table. It was the tong hatchet. The handle was short and curved; the blade glittering sharp.

"*T'sing lai!*" said the hatchet-man, and started toward the window.

"*Ho hang lai!*" said the gambler. He watched until the hatchet-man had gained the roof and drawn up his rope. Then he closed the window, picked up the hatchet, and stepped behind the screen.

"Funny thing about that Wah Lee case!" growled Detective Lyons. "We find him sprawled on the bed behind the screen like he had been thrown there. A tong hatchet was sunk deep in his head. That seems to prove that it was a tong affair."

"But now listen; on turning Wah Lee over we found he had been stabbed through the heart. Doc Evans declares that when Wah Lee was struck with that tong hatchet, *he had been dead at least twenty minutes!*"

SPECIAL PRIZE FOR THE BEST SHERLOCKIANA: AUGUST DERLETH

In 1945 the publishing firm of Mycroft & Moran, Sauk City, Wisconsin, issued August Derleth's "IN RE: SHERLOCK HOLMES" (THE ADVENTURES OF SOLAR PONS), with an Introduction by Vincent Starrett. The book was dedicated to "those Knights of the Gasogene and Tantalus, Keepers of the Flame, the Baker Street Irregulars" — long may they rave! The twelve tales in the book are pastiches of Sherlock Holmes — sincere and reverent imitations of "that extraordinary man" — with Solar Pons in the ratiocinative role of the hawk-nosed, hawk-eyed sleuth, Dr. Lyndon Parker playing the part of Dr. Watson, and 7 Praed Street substituting for 221B Baker Street.

August Derleth chose three people to introduce Solar Pons to the readers of "IN RE: SHERLOCK HOLMES." If these three testimonials, on the back of the book's dust-jacket, do not whet the reader's appetite, then the cause is lost forever. Vincent Starrett said that "Solar Pons is — as it were — an ectoplasmic emanation of his great prototype, and his adventures are pure pastiche. He is not a caricature of Sherlock Holmes. He is, rather, a clever impersonator, with a twinkle in his eye . . ." Your Editors wrote: "How many budding authors, not even old enough to vote, could have captured the spirit and atmosphere of the Sacred Writings with as much fidelity? It proves how deeply Sir Arthur's magic enchanted youthful readers. Mr. Derleth's choice of the euphonic variant — Solar Pons — is an appealing addition to the fascinating lore of Sherlockian nomenclature." And Anthony Boucher said: "Sherlock Holmes' decision to live alone in the bee-loud glade left an abhorrent vacuum; but of all Holmesian commentators, only August Derleth has perceived the obvious truth — that the vacuum must be filled. And how admirably Solar Pons fills it! His adventures are no mere literary echoes; they are time-spirals, rich in the prickling sensation of I-have-been-here-before — and where would one sooner be?"

August Derleth has written a new sequence of Solar Pons stories. He submitted one of them to last year's EQMM contest, and we awarded it a special prize for the best Sherlockiana — indeed, we thought "The Six Silver Spiders" the best of all the Solar Pons tales written to date. The story will be included in Mr. Derleth's second volume of Solarian adventures, to be titled (most appropriately) THE MEMOIRS OF SOLAR PONS, and to be published later this year with an Introduction by Your Humble Servants, who plan to speculate more deeply on "the fascinating lore of Sherlockian nomenclature." And in the more distant future there will be a

third volume about the Pride of Praed Street — to be titled, with equal appropriateness, THE RETURN OF SOLAR PONS.

In the meantime, "once again in old London, 'the game is afoot' . . . the 'nostalgic charm has been recaptured . . ." Sherlock Holmes — a rose by any other name — rides again!

THE SIX SILVER SPIDERS

by AUGUST DERLETH

PERHAPS one of the attitudes in which I have seen my friend Solar Pons most often is that of poring over a book or studying the agony columns of the daily papers, his keen, dark eyes intent under their full brows, the thin lips pressed together, the almost feral face grim, presenting nothing so much as the aspect of a bloodhound on the scent. It was thus I found him late one afternoon in October early in the fourth decade of this century, when I came in out of a dense white fog that lay especially heavy along Praed Street.

Solar Pons's dark eyes flashed up from and back to the object of his scrutiny. "You came by Underground, I see," he observed.

"I suppose my cuffs are showing Underground dust," I replied with some asperity.

"Nothing so crude, my dear Parker, but quite as elementary. You are too wet to have taken a cab, and not wet enough to have walked very far. Paddington Station is near enough to account for the degree of moisture."

By this time I had removed my topcoat and hat.

"Mrs. Johnson will have supper in soon," Solar Pons continued, leaning back now. "Tell me, what do you make of this, Parker?"

The object he handed me was clearly a leaflet or small brochure issued by a bookseller.

"A request for bids on the private library of Paul Guillaume, Comte d'Erlette," I read, opening it to glance at the statements which preceded the listing of books. Solar Pons said nothing, but his sharp eyes were fixed on me not without a glint of humor. I read the dignified announcement: "Mr. John Amworthy, having acquired the private library of occult literature formerly the possession of the Comte d'Erlette of Erlette, near Voynnes, France, will dispose of it to the highest bidder on September, 13th. Bids are to be sealed and sent to Mr. Amworthy in care of The Boar's Head Book Shop, 17 Princes Street, Edinburgh, Scotland. All bids will be opened in the presence of bidders or their duly accredited representatives at three o'clock in the afternoon of September, 13th, on the premises of The Boar's Head Book

Shop." There followed an account of the death of the collector and former owner, together with a statement explaining Mr. Amworthy's fortunate possession of the rare volumes "herein described."

"There is surely nothing extraordinary about this," I said.

"Pray examine it."

Somewhat nettled at his determination, I turned to the titles listed, and dutifully read through the first entry. "Al Hazred, Abdul: *NECRONOMICON*. Tr. from the Arabic into Latin by Olaus Wormius. With several wood-cut tables of signs and mystic symbols. Madrid, 1647. Small folio, full calf with ornamental stamping in blind, including date, 1715. Binding somewhat stained and rubbed. Slight foxing, but only in first ten pages. In fine condition, and one of only six known copies of the first Latin edition. Only other copies known to be in existence are in the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris, the Widener Library at Harvard, and Miskatonic University Library at Arkham, Massachusetts, U.S.A. Only privately owned copy known to have been in existence disappeared from the library of the Massachusetts artist, R. U. Pickman. Only two copies in Arabic known to have existed. According to Von Junzt in *UNAUSSPRECHLICHEN KULTEN* (see number 17, page four this catalog), *'es steht ausser Zweifel, dass dieses Buch ist die Grundlage der Okkulteliteratur.'*"

I glanced at several of the other titles listed: d'Erlette, Paul Henri,

Comte de: *CULTES DES GOULES*, Rouen, 1737; Prinn, Ludvig: *DE VERMIS MYSTERIIS*, Prague, 1807; *LIBER IVONIS*, (author unknown), Rome, 1662;—all manifest occult literature. The four-page brochure was printed in singularly good taste, with the appearance of being set by hand. Some of the books were described in the most minute detail, and many were "with a lock" of silver or gold. In all there were but twenty-seven items, and only two of them were represented in private libraries; while many of the rare books listed were believed to be the only copies extant. For the library intact, said a concluding note, no bid under two thousand pounds was acceptable.

"It seems to be an extremely rare, possibly unique, collection," I said.

"It does indeed. It suggests nothing to you?" asked Pons.

"Nothing, except that only a wealthy collector could afford to bid on the collection as a lot."

"So much is evident," agreed Pons. "Have you ever heard of the library of the Count de Fortsas?"

I confessed my ignorance of it.

"Some ninety years ago a sixteen-page pamphlet-catalogue of the exceedingly rare books in the library of Jean Népomucène-August Pichauld, Comte de Fortsas, was offered for sale at Binche. The catalogue was printed at Mons, and was sent out to collectors in several countries. It excited bibliophiles in England as well as on the Continent; bids came in to the printer at Mons, who had issued the cata-

logue. So did collectors; on the day of the sale, in August 1840, there were so many strangers in Binche that the gravest suspicions were aroused among the police, who thought these curious-looking characters might be dangerous fellows planning an *émeute*. But, my dear Parker, there was no such library, there were no such books, there was, in fact, not even a Comte de Fortsas; all existed only in the brilliant imagination of a certain antiquarian, M. Renier Chalon, who wrote books on numismatics and had a fancy to amuse himself at the expense of his fellow bibliophiles."

I took up the pamphlet again. "Pons, you cannot mean . . . ?"

"Indeed," said Pons, smiling, "I fear such is the case. All these books have a precarious existence only in the writings of certain minor authors of American origin, all apparently followers, in a remote sense, of the work of Edgar Allan Poe. The catalogue is, in short, a hoax."

"But the Count d'Erlette?"

"Erlette is a provincial name in France. The family existed in some numbers before the Revolution, but the last member to carry a title died in 1919. The Boar's Head Book Shop is real enough, but clearly only an accommodation address. I fancy we are dealing with a gentleman of extraordinary cunning, who is not unwilling to take the greatest pains to achieve his end."

"And what is that?"

"That is the problem, Parker. We

shall hope to elucidate it." He tapped the catalogue. "This was sent over by messenger in mid-afternoon by Baron Elouard de Baseuil. I expect him immediately after supper. And here, if I am not mistaken, is Mrs. Johnson with our supper."

Our long-suffering landlady bustled in as he spoke, murmuring plaintively that someone had better induce Pons to eat or he would waste away to a shadow. "Always studying, always figuring things out, and always forgetting to eat. This lamb is stewed in white wine," she ended with emphasis.

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Johnson," said Pons, drawing the lamb toward him, "in these rooms it is more than customarily true that, as the French have it, *De la main à la bouche, se perd souvent la soupe*."

"That lamb won't be lost, Mr. Pons," said Mrs. Johnson, and, sighing, left us to our supper.

The dishes had just been removed when our visitor arrived.

"A man of decision, impatient, and at the moment in great haste," said Pons, listening to the steps on the stairs.

Mrs. Johnson ushered in a gentleman in evening dress. He was a tall, imposing man, with a square face on which he wore a Van Dyke, and a monocle over one of his clear blue eyes. His beard was streaked with gray, as was the hair of his head, for he carried his opera hat in his one hand, and his stick in the other.

"I have the honor to address Mr.

Solar Pons?" he said, looking unerringly at my companion.

"Pray sit down, Baron de Baseuil. Dr. Parker is eminently trustworthy."

The Baron acknowledged the introduction with a formal bow. He sat down. His eye had caught sight of the catalogue.

"You have had opportunity to examine this, Mr. Pons?"

"I have. I perceive it is an elaborately conceived and skillfully executed hoax. But do let us hear your story, for it is evident that you are on the way to an engagement."

"Mr. Pons, the story is simply told," began the Baron with animation. "Six of us responded to the lure. I myself journeyed to Edinburgh. So did Colonel David Wade, Sir Austin Mannell, Kester Roxbrugh, and representatives of Lady Monica Jevrons and Alan Thomason. We arrived at The Boar's Head Book Shop only to find a message awaiting us, telling us that the entire collection had been bought by a barrister representing an heir to the estate of the late Count. You will have observed the resemblance to the Fortsas hoax. I regret to say that we did not see the resemblance until then. The books listed, you see, have a certain kind of spurious existence, and the fact is that the books have been held by some readers to be real volumes. In the case of the title which heads the list, every reputed fact supposedly 'known' about this rare volume has been skillfully added to the customary data one always finds in descriptions

of books up for sale, thus lending it still more superficial reality. Mr. Pons, I am not a man to be hoaxed. I want to know the identity of the man behind this affair."

Pons sat now with his eyes closed and his chin resting on one hand. Without opening his eyes, he asked, "And the owner of The Boar's Head? Presumably you questioned him?"

"Of course," replied the baron. "All arrangements had been made with him by mail. He was promised that the books would be brought in just before the hour of the sale on the thirteenth. A handsome retainer was sent to him with the initial letter from Mr. Amworthy, who is doubtless as fictitious as his catalogue."

"In name only," said Pons. "Was there no occasion to make inquiry by post?"

"None. The catalogue, as you see, is explicit."

"I have read it, yes. And your fellow-bibliophiles — you did not think it strange that only six were represented?"

"Mr. Pons, we are the best-known collectors of occult lore in the British Isles."

"You went up by train and returned when?"

"The following day. We had anticipated that some time would be lost in the opening of the bids and the disposal of the books. All but Colonel Wade had engaged rooms, and he followed suit after he reached Edinburgh."

"So you were out of London, then,

for most of two days and a night?"

"That is correct."

Pons meditated for a moment. Then he said, "I fancy this little matter holds promise of an entertaining chase, Baron. Will you be so kind as to set down immediately an order permitting me to examine your collection? I propose to begin at once."

Baron de Baseuil came to his feet. "Very well, Mr. Pons. Permit me to excuse myself so that I can take leave of my host for the evening. I will be at your service in an hour at my home in Portman Square."

He took his departure, and at once Pons flung aside his casual air.

He went swiftly to his shelf of references and came back to the table with a slender book entitled *THE BRITISH BIBLIOPHILE*. "We should be able to find our client in this little work," he murmured, as he leafed through the pages. "Ah, here we are!

"de Baseuil . . . born August 21, 1871, Paris, France. Son of former consular official in London. British citizen since 1912.' Hm! this is primarily biographical. Let us see. Ah, here is a paragraph pertinent to his collecting activities. 'Possesses one of largest private libraries in England. Specializes in occult literature, esoterica, books relating to ancient civilizations. Fine collection of miniature books, including one of the six spiders of the forger, Yeovil. Also interested in all incunabula (before 1650) — subject immaterial. Value of library estimated at £10,000.'"

"Not particularly informative."

"You caught nothing of interest?" asked Pons.

"No," I retorted.

"I submit to you it is not just a coincidence that the number 'six' should occur twice within so short a time. Our client informed us that only six collectors were represented at the sale; I submit that each of the others he mentioned is likewise the owner of one of the six spiders of the forger, Yeovil."

"What the devil are spiders doing in a book collection?"

"Ah, my dear Parker, they have an honored niche. Yeovil was a forger of no mean ability. He forged not only sovereigns and guineas, but also books and works of art. The six silver spiders — they are actually scarabs — are hollow and each contains part of a chapter from the *BOOK OF THE DEAD*, in miniature book form, supposedly written by an Egyptian priest of the time of Amenhotep. One of Yeovil's most skillful forgeries."

"They have a certain value then?"

Pons shook his head. "Only as *curiosa*. They are hardly worth stealing, if you are contemplating their theft as a possible motive."

"What about this fellow, Yeovil?"

Pons was already divesting himself of his dressing-gown and eyeing his Inverness. "It would not be an exaggeration to look upon him as one of the most fascinating figures in the entire annals of British crime. I fancy he is somewhat before your time, Parker — he has been in Dartmoor

for the past two decades, and must be an old man now. Had it not been for his impetuous slaying of a bobby in the attempt to take him, he might well be a free man today. He was without doubt one of the most skilled forgers in history, with a talent that permitted him to enter many fields. He might have been a great artist, had he not chosen a career of crime instead. Many of his effects were never recovered, but his forgeries have never been duplicated since his time, which is fortunate since his guineas and sovereigns particularly were almost flawless and very difficult to detect. Inspector Jamison had occasion to mention him only a few months ago; copies of Yeovil's correspondence to and from Dartmoor are still being carefully examined by experts at the Yard, where they have not given up hope of recovering the rest of his effects. But come, let us be on our way."

Since the distance from our lodgings to Portman Square was not great, Pons elected to walk by way of Edgware Road and Upper Berkeley Street. "There is a sense of adventurous expectancy about a London fog," he often said. "One can expect almost anything to come out of it." But tonight he walked in silence, deep in thought. His long, imposing stride, his slightly open Inverness, his height—all lent him an impressiveness which was manifestly felt by passers-by, who instinctively swerved aside on meeting us.

Our client awaited us at his sum-

ptuous dwelling. He was still in evening clothes and had obviously not long preceded us. He had given instructions that we be shown to the library where he kept his collection of books, and we found him there.

"I am at your service, Mr. Pons. What can I show you first?" he asked.

"I fear I may disappoint you, Baron," replied Pons. "But I have a fancy to see the silver spider miniature of the famous forger, Yeovil."

"By all means, sir."

Baron de Baseuil walked to a nearby case, opened it, and took out a little box of the kind in which jewelry is kept. He opened it and turned it toward us. Cushioned inside lay an exquisitely wrought silver scarab.

"The miniature, of course, is inside," said the Baron.

Pons took up the scarab and turned it over, disclosing a tiny door. Under our client's eyes Pons opened the little door.

The scarab was empty.

A cry of mingled anger and shock escaped Baron de Baseuil. He took the silver container from Pons's fingers, his hand trembling; he turned it over, examining it from all sides. Then he cast an apprehensive glance toward the remainder of his treasures.

"Do not alarm yourself, Baron," said Pons softly. "I daresay this is the only object which has been stolen."

"Sir, I have been informed of your powers," said the Baron. "But how did you guess?"

Pons smiled enigmatically. "Surely

it was obvious that the elaborate hoax of The Boar's Head catalogue was perpetrated for the purpose of taking you sufficiently far from London so that someone might have access to your collection, Baron. Six of you were present or represented at the sale; there are in existence six of Yeovil's miniature forgeries. I dislike to believe in coincidence, Baron. The deduction is almost inevitable that your companion-dupes were very probably the only other persons to receive the spurious catalogue and that each one of them, like yourself, possesses one of Yeovil's silver pieces."

"It is true, we own the six spiders among us," said Baron de Baseuil thoughtfully. "But, of course, it is really absurdly simple, now that you explain it. Yet there is little reason for having taken this; it has no great value."

"As to that, we shall see. Let us discover what manner of thief we have to deal with."

The Baron rang for his manservant.

"Bateman, on one of the days I was in Scotland, someone called," said the Baron. "Who was it?"

"No one called but Mr. Wootyn, the appraiser from Sotheby's."

"What did he want?"

"He said he had come in response to your request to appraise several small pieces in the collection, sir. He was here perhaps ten minutes, and said that he would write to you in a few days. I assumed he had done so. I did not leave him out of my sight, sir."

The Baron held up the silver

scarab. "Did he examine this, too?"

"Yes, sir, I believe he did."

"The miniature could have been abstracted easily," observed Pons.

"Is anything wrong, sir?" asked Bateman anxiously.

"Telephone Wootyn at his home. I'll speak to him from here."

"Very good sir," Bateman left the room.

"This is amazing, Mr. Pons," said Baron de Baseuil. "I have known Wootyn for twenty years."

"I take it you did not instruct him to make an appraisal for you. I'm afraid you will discover that Mr. Wootyn made no call here that day."

The telephone rang; Baron de Baseuil reached for it at once. Our client spoke but a few minutes to ascertain that Pons was correct — Mr. Wootyn had not called at the house in Portman Square since April.

"I cannot understand it," muttered the Baron, as he turned from the instrument.

"We are dealing with an exceedingly clever man, Baron. He has apparently familiarized himself with your habits, and has succeeded in impersonating Wootyn so cleverly as to deceive Bateman. I rather think there is no time to be lost, if we are not already too late. I must have sight of the remaining miniatures without delay — if any do remain. I recall their owners and took the trouble to jot down their addresses before I left Praed Street. Lady Monica Jevrons was one of the two who did not go to Edinburgh?"

"She was ill, Mr. Pons."

"I fancy her home will be the most likely place for our next visit. Will you be so good as to telephone her and ask her to receive us immediately? Please also ask your other fellow-bibliophiles to see us briefly during the course of the evening."

"Certainly, Mr. Pons. Permit me to put a car at your disposal."

"Thank you. It will facilitate our movements."

So saying, Pons led the way from the house. We stood briefly on the curb until the Baron's chauffeur brought his car around. Pons gave the address of Lady Monica Jevrons to the chauffeur and we rode away.

"What manner of chase is this, Pons?" I asked dubiously.

"I have taken a shot in the dark, Parker," he replied. "But I daresay, unlike some of us who venture, I have come close to the mark."

It was midnight when we returned to 7B Praed Street.

"A most entertaining evening," said Pons jubilantly. "A delightful character, this fellow who is able to transform himself in the space of a single day from Mr. Wootyn of Sotheby's to Colonel Wade's cousin from Bristol, from Sir Austin Mannell's solicitor to Kester Roxbrugh's business manager. Indeed, I am impatient to meet him. He has made no less than four separate attempts to reach Lady Jevrons's collection, and six to get at Alan Thomason's. Apparently he disdains simple breaking

and entering. But I am confident that he will not despair; he will continue to try. Let us have a look at our catch."

He had removed his Inverness and deerstalker cap. Now he placed on the table the two tiny little books, so beautifully made, which with the permission of their owners, he had taken from the "spiders" of Lady Jevrons and also Alan Thomason.

He drew forward his magnifying glass and bent to the first of the books.

I stood behind him, looking down. The tiny books, which were approximately three-quarters of an inch by an inch, were singularly beautiful in craftsmanship. They appeared to have been written in a script with the aspect of print, and the pages were decorated with hieroglyphics which had an indisputable look of authenticity. They were bound in limp leather, with decorative end-papers, intricately scrolled. To Pons's face had now come that intentness of expression so characteristic of him; he was plainly "on the scent"—the keenness of his eyes, the pursed lips, the angular line of his jaw all gave evidence that the miniature books challenged his imagination. In a few moments he was lost in contemplation; he might have been unaware of my existence; so I left him shortly after and retired.

How long he sat up studying the two tiny books I had no way of knowing in the morning, for when I came to breakfast, he sat at table,

obviously waiting for me. His eyes had a glint of satisfaction in them; and the moment I appeared he proffered one of the miniatures.

"Take a look at the end-papers, Parker. What do you make of them?"

I took the book, waiting for Mrs. Johnson to bring breakfast, and scrutinized the end-paper decoration with care. The elaborate design which Yeovil had worked into the pages was planned for a single page, and repeated thus four times on the two end-papers.

"The motif looks Egyptian."

"It is meant to," replied Pons.

"There appears to be a numeral worked into the design," I ventured.

"Capital, Parker! What is it?"

"6." I hesitated. "But, of course, there are six books. This is manifestly the sixth of the group."

"Then there would be a numeral, too, in this one, would there not? What do you see?"

He gave me the second of the miniatures. Look as I might, I could not discover any numeral on the end-papers of the second miniature. But that there was something to be seen I could not doubt; Pons had discovered something, and he meant that I, too, should do so. I studied the design with the greatest attention and ultimately found what appeared to be the letter *B*. I said as much.

"Excellent, my good Parker! So, indeed it is."

"But what significance does it have?" I asked.

"I have worked upon the problem half the night. If you will study the text, you will observe that the book with the letter in it would seem to be the concluding volume of the set of miniatures. An examination of the text in the volume with the numeral 6 suggests that it is the second of the series. We have thus to suppose that the numeral or numerals in addition to the letter or letters compose a message of some kind. I submit that not very much of a message could be contained in six letters and numerals. But they could very readily convey such a message as an address. Proceeding, therefore, on that deduction, we begin with this arrangement —" Here he thrust before me a piece of paper upon which he had written:

- 6 - - - B

"Now, either the message to be conveyed is an address or it is not. If it is not, then we are left with the suggestion of a code which must be extremely limited, and must therefore be known to very few persons. Yeovil has been in Dartmoor for so long a time that the possibility of anyone's reading such a code with ease is appreciably diminished. That it is an address is much the more likely probability. Accepting that assumption, we do not find any very great difficulty confronting us. It is not likely that more than the first three spaces are occupied by numerals, and the probability is that the '6' is the last numeral of two;

the first is then necessarily one of but nine numerals. It is manifest, furthermore, that there is no designation for road, street, lane, square, court, or place of any kind; I submit that this very absence suggests an address which ought to be relatively easy to discover. 'B' is then the last letter of an abbreviation; presumably, it is either the third or fourth letter of the abbreviation. I began with the assumption that it is the fourth, and proceeded to consider the streets and byways of London, with particular attention to the vicinity of Yeovil's sphere of greatest activity. I began with Barbers Hall in Monkwell Street, and went steadily down the list of all the streets which might satisfy the requirements. There is scarcely any need to burden you with all the details of my search, but I concluded finally with Holborn."

He handed me yet another slip of paper upon which he had written:

- 6 H O L B

"However, when I had applied each digit from one to nine in turn to this address, none seemed to me likely as the repository for the kind of — shall we say 'treasure'? — I expected to find. Yet I was loath to discard Holborn. It was squarely in the center of Yeovil's sphere; it was certainly the likeliest of streets, from many points of view; yet the numerals did not satisfy. It occurred to me finally that by only a slight alteration, to High Holborn, I arrived at this —"

A third slip of paper was forthcoming:

- 6 H H L B

"And at once it was evident that the address must be 16 High Holborn. That is the address of the Soames Museum, an institution supported by funds out of a private trust, and open to donations of pieces appropriate to their various exhibits. What could be more ideal as a repository than a semi-private museum? If your practice permits, we shall just take a run over there this morning."

"And where does Yeovil, the forger, fit into all this?"

"I talked to Dartmoor on the telephone this morning. Poor Yeovil, alas! is not long for this world. He was stricken with a fatal malady in August, and his death is but a matter of a fortnight away. I submit that the long arm of coincidence dangles too insistently upon the scene. Surely it is too much to consider it only coincidence that the onset of Yeovil's malady in August should be followed within a month by the appearance of The Boar's Head hoax and the purloining of four of the six miniature book forgeries created by Yeovil before his capture? No, Parker, the matter strikes me as essentially simple — Yeovil had kept his secret against the hope of escape. He revealed it only when he realized that the secret would no longer serve him. How he did it, I do not yet know. The cipher experts at the Yard are not amateurs, and Yeovil was certainly aware that

his effects were sorely wanted. I have reason to hope that we have anticipated Yeovil's wishes in the course he desired his correspondent to follow."

"But what 'treasure' could Yeovil have hidden?"

Pons shrugged. "We shall discover that, I hope, in good time. We shall also find out to whom Yeovil wrote his secret. I asked Dartmoor for the names of those people with whom Yeovil corresponded, and I have their promise to send along the names and addresses just as soon as they can be ascertained. I fancy that a life-long prisoner at Dartmoor is not likely to have many friends who correspond with him with any regularity."

Immediately after our meal we made our way to the Soames Museum, in advance of opening hours, for Pons had made arrangements with the curator for our admission. The building housed the one-time collection of the late Sir Rowley Soames, and such pieces as had been added by various donors since his time. It was open to the public five afternoons each week. It was not a large museum, but three guards and the curator were regularly employed, though at this hour of the morning the curator and only one guard were present.

The curator was a corpulent man of middle age, with thinning hair and a pink complexion.

"I know you by reputation, of course, Mr. Pons," he said. "I do hope that your visit here will not

result in the appearance of any unfavorable publicity."

"I am confident that we can keep the matter from the papers, Mr. Fredenthal. It is highly confidential, and this visit, if I am correct in my assumption, may actually forestall precisely the kind of public notice you seem to fear."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Pons?" asked the curator apprehensively.

"I should like to know what pieces were added to the museum in 1911, or perhaps 1910, either by a gentleman named Yeovil or anonymously. There is a more remote possibility that the pieces I am seeking were sent to the Museum under some other name, but the probability is that they were sent anonymously."

"Well, that should be easy, Mr. Pons," replied the curator then, and bustled about to take from his desk a volume labeled *Acquisitions*. "That was before my coming to Soames, but the record should be here." He was turning the pages as he spoke. "Now, let us see — 1910 was the first year, I think you said. We don't ordinarily receive many accessions, as perhaps you know. Ah, here it is. Six accessions in that year — only one anonymous, however, which is dated December, a set of four books bound in vellum, purporting to be Thirteenth Century volumes."

"You say 'purported'?" asked Pons.

"There is some question about their authenticity, Mr. Pons." He

turned another page. "Here we are in 1911, and again we have but one anonymous donation, early in the year—a Norse seaman's chest."

"I would like to examine both the books and the chest, Mr. Fredenthal," said Pons without hesitation.

"I will have them here in a few minutes, sir."

The curator was as good as his word. In a few minutes the set of books, bound in hand-tooled white vellum, and the chest, a small, squat object, painted a dull green with a flower decoration, and secured by bands of wrought iron, were put down before Pons.

"These are Yeovil's," said Pons without a moment's hesitation. "Here is the same precision of craftsmanship." He took up one of the books, put it down, and picked up another. In this fashion, he handled all four volumes. "These are uncommonly heavy," he reflected. "Yet none has many pages, though the parchment appears to be genuine. But it was always so of Yeovil's work." He gave his attention to the binding of the book. The front and back covers were unusually thick; each cover represented a thickness of almost an inch and, while the outside appeared to be soft and padded, the inside cover was firm, with a sheet of parchment pasted over the end-paper.

He turned to the sea-chest. It was not locked. He opened it and looked inside. It was quite empty.

"I observe this chest has a great deal of weight, also," said Pons. "I

know little of Norse customs. Are such chests commonly weighted?"

The curator nodded. "They are usually made with thick, heavy bottoms. This chest is no exception."

"I fear I shall be obliged to commit an act of vandalism, Mr. Fredenthal. I believe the bottom of this chest is not solid."

"But certainly it isn't hollow, Mr. Pons!"

"No, sir, it is not. But I submit that it is not entirely wood. The chest has too much weight to be accounted for by the wooden bottom and the iron bands. The books, too, have more weight than they should have. I regret this necessity, but the only alternative would result in a distressing kind of publicity."

The curator acquiesced, and Pons set to work.

In a short time he had taken the chest apart, and there lay revealed the heavy block of wood which had served as its bottom. But it was evident now that it was not a solid block, for it was made up of two layers, the bottom layer very thick, the top thin and mortised in. Pons lost no time in removing the top layer and exposing the bottom—and its contents, a set of tools and dies.

"Great heavens, Mr. Pons!" exclaimed the curator. "What are those objects?"

"They represent something Scotland Yard has sought for twenty years, Mr. Fredenthal—the tools

and dies used by the forger, Yeovil, to perfect the almost undetectable forgeries of sovereigns and guineas which made their appearance in 1909 and are still turning up. We will find the rest of the paraphernalia in the covers of these books. I shall take these things along with me, Mr. Fredenthal, and dispatch them with my compliments to Chief Inspector Titus at Scotland Yard; he was the sergeant in charge at the time of Yeovil's arrest. I fancy it will not take too much trouble to repair these spurious antiques."

Back at number 7B, we found a message from Dartmoor. Mrs. Johnson had scrupulously copied it in her laborious script.

Pons took it up and read it aloud. "Yeovil has had only two regular correspondents since the death of his brother in 1927. They are a sister, Mrs. Clement Jones, 13 Lord Street, Bristol, and a nephew, Alastair White, 33 Gerrard Street, London.'—I daresay it is White we want; the impersonations would have been beyond Yeovil's sister. We should manage to reach his place during the lunch hour. His quarters are not far from the theatrical district, and it is entirely likely that he is an actor. If we take the Underground at Baker Street we can go up to Leicester Square from Piccadilly."

I protested. "But to what end, Pons? We have the dies."

"And I will send them off to Titus within the hour by messenger, at the same time that I return the minia-

tures to Lady Jevrons and Alan Thomason," answered Pons. "Some kind of report ought to be made to our client, as well. But I submit that the primary problem is not the recovery of the dies and tools, nor yet the solution to the intriguing mystery of The Boar's Head catalogue hoax and the six silver spiders, but the ultimate future of a young man who has already shown a brilliant, if erratic, talent."

It was clearly Pons's plan to gain access to Alastair White's rooms before that young man himself returned. In this he had no difficult task; he represented himself as a friend of White's, and, with knowledge of the easy familiarity that obtained among members of the theatrical profession, White's landlady readily admitted us to his rooms.

Once inside, however, Pons's casual air dropped from him. He stood in the middle of the sitting-room looking all about him.

"A man of method and determination," he murmured. "He would seem to be scrupulously neat, for everything is in its place, including—" he moved swiftly forward as he spoke—"his letters." He lifted them from the rack on the desk, and carried them to a chair next to the window, from which he could watch the street below.

He was already scanning the letters. For some moments he read silently, rapidly finishing one letter and turning to the next. "Ah, these are sub-

tle," he said at last. "Yeovil has been doing his best to persuade his nephew that security on the stage is difficult to achieve, that it is almost impossible to gain in all walks of life save crime."

"Surely he does not say so!"

"Not in so many words. But the effect is manifest, particularly when these letters are read cumulatively. They are insidious — they appeal to vanity, they attack integrity, and they undermine courage. Ah, Yeovil is clever, far too clever! And how many letters there were before this group, which dates from May of this year, it is impossible to say. But here we are in August." He read for a moment. "Yeovil has had his attack of illness; he suspects it is to be mortal. Yes, yes — he writes: 'They have not given me any reason to hope here in the prison hospital that I will leave here alive. In the last few days I have been thinking more and more often of the life I have led, and I wish I could resume it where I left off — not the criminal life, my boy, but the creative life. Or that someone else could pick it up where I left off. But the race, I say again, as I have said before, is to the ingenious, not to the brute. It is as true in one walk of life as in the other, in art as in crime, and indeed, perfect crimes are always works of art. The challenge is before you, my boy, as it is before all of us at a given but seldom fore-known time in life. When I consider the beautiful things I have made — in imitation, it is true, but in some cases the imitations were even better

than the originals — I believe that the treasure I would like to see most of all is my little set of six silver spiders and their miniature books. If ever you get the chance, by all means look them over. You will understand what your old uncle meant when I write that I regret having relinquished that work.' He could hardly have been plainer, and yet he makes no gift of his treasure to his nephew; on the contrary, the nephew must exercise his utmost ingenuity to achieve it."

Pons restored the letters to their previous position, and then began a systematic search of Alastair White's quarters. He opened drawers, looked through the closet, examined all the books on the shelves, and finally returned to look at the little group of books set up between bookends on our quarry's desk. He took them up, one after another, reading their titles, until at last he gave a little crow of triumph, and turned with an ancient-looking little book in his hands.

"This one seems out of place, eh?"

I read its title: SERMONS DU PÈRE BRETONNEAU DE LA COMPAGNIE DE JESUS.

Then, with an easy gesture, Pons opened it past its seventieth page and disclosed a box; the book was a cleverly-made dummy, and the box thus revealed contained the missing four miniature books which had been taken from Yeovil's six silver spiders.

In half an hour the owner of the rooms came.

He was a man approaching thirty,

not ill-favored in looks, with singular presence, and a personality which was at once apparent.

"Mr. Alastair White, I believe," said Pons. "We are recent admirers of your work, particularly your splendid impersonation of Mr. Anthony Wootyn of Sotheby's."

The smile of pleasure which had begun to grow on his face was arrested; it faded.

"Permit me," said Pons, bowing. "Mr. Solar Pons, at your service. Allow me to present Dr. Parker."

"Ah, the detective," said White with an almost dramatic air. "Mr. Pons, I have committed no crime."

"Surely not yet — if we discount the abstractions of the four miniature books from your uncle's silver scarabs and the impertinent hoax perpetrated upon six of the city's most illustrious bibliophiles. It would seem to me a pity, however, that so imaginative a gentleman, so accomplished an impersonator, should consider even for a moment yielding to the subtle blandishments of his dying uncle, no matter how much he may have admired him in childhood and youth. Tell me, Mr. White, were you aware of the nature of the 'treasure' you seek?"

White was wary and silent.

"Pray do not be wary. I am not here to place you under arrest. Not yet. That alternative lies with you. I have recovered the miniatures and will return them to their owners. I have read your uncle's letters, and I should like to ask you again whether you know what 'treasure' he had hid-

den for you to find, Mr. White?"

"No, Mr. Pons, I did not."

"I have recovered the 'treasure' but two hours ago; it is now at Scotland Yard. Mr. White, it consisted of the tools and dies your uncle used to make those excellent counterfeit sovereigns and guineas for which he is so justly famed in the annals of crime. He has led you to the brink of a career of crime. The tools and dies are now out of your reach — but you might well have been faced with the decision of whether to use them or not. The high place is still before you, however. I suggest that your uncle's insidious letters do not tell all the story or even offer you the true alternatives. I should consider that the mind which conceived and executed The Boar's Head catalogue-hoax would be lost on crime — even as your uncle's was. May I extend my invitation to join us at dinner and let me present the real alternatives?"

"Mr. Pons, whatever I say can be turned against me."

Pons chuckled. "Mr. White, pray excuse me. I will wait below for five minutes. If you should elect to accept my invitation, I hope to see you soon. If not, you may be sure that we will ultimately meet again, in less pleasant circumstances. Good day."

Three minutes after we reached Gerrard Street, Alastair White emerged from the house. He came striding up to Pons.

"Mr. Solar Pons," he said. "I believe we have an engagement for dinner."

Here is the second in a series of short puzzle stories which derive from folklore — from the folk-tales of all ages and all nations. These modern versions have been written by Mark Rondy, the pseudonym of a Philadelphia schoolteacher.

"Mark Rondy" is in his late thirties, married, and has two children. He has taught high school for fifteen years, and for the past seven of them has been trying to establish himself as a free-lance writer. So far he has been most successful writing juveniles, although he has had articles published by several adult magazines, and one "quality" story (the quotes are Mr. Rondy's — we don't quite know what he means; there is no degree of quality which requires the apology of quotation marks). More about the author in issues to come . . .

"Indian Wampum" is an early American detective story in the purest and truest sense of the phrase. It stems from Penobscot Indian lore — the Penobscots were one of four tribes of Algonquin stock who called themselves Wabanakis — "Children of the Dawn Country" (Maine). A collection of their tales and legends, privately published by a Penobscot named Joseph Nicolar, appeared in 1893. But surviving Penobscots do not use this book: they tell the tales as they recollect hearing them from the lips of their parents and grandparents. "Indian Wampum" dates, of course, from the time when white men first landed on the rock-bound shores of New England.

INDIAN WAMPUM: *The Sign of Justice*

re-told by MARK RONDY

MY DAUGHTER, Minnecoma," said Hahatan, raising his eyes from the patterning of white beads in his hands, "is already promised."

Wonnewok grunted. "To the white man who was shipwrecked?"

"He is to be adopted into our tribe," Hahatan reminded him. "Tomorrow after the games he receives his Indian name."

"But this is today," insisted Wonnewok. "My marriage wampum — do you keep it or reject it, O Hahatan?" He stared coolly into

Hahatan's troubled eyes. "My father, Pocomic, chief of the Wabanakis, comes tomorrow for the festival. His heart will grieve if he loses the friendship of Hahatan."

Hahatan pointed silently, and Wonnewok swung round to face the couple coming toward them — the lithe Indian maiden and Pierre Gaudin, both smiling, and talking closely, their heads bent over a neck-piece of white silk in the girl's hands.

Hahatan held up the beaded belt for them to see. "The marriage wam-

pum of Wonnewok. I cannot reject it without angering Pocomic, his father and my chief. Nor can I show two faces to the white man, Pierre Gaudin. Therefore, let there be a contest between Wonnewok and Pierre Gaudin. Let Minnecoma wed the winner."

Minnecoma gasped. "My father—I!"

Pierre Gaudin made no outcry. He nodded thoughtfully, and said, "I understand, Chief Hahatan."

At Minnecoma's gaze upon the white man, and at the white man's words, Wonnewok spat. "And I!"

Hahatan spoke in clipped syllables. "At the headwaters of the lake lairs a panther, killer of men and terror of our woodlands. Who slays this panther and brings its skin, he will join hands with Minnecoma."

Pierre Gaudin said, "When?"

"At dawn," replied Hahatan. "A rifle and a hunting knife for each man . . . Do not, my daughter, see either of your suitors any further today."

"My father has spoken."

Pierre Gaudin gently took his neck-piece from her fingers. "This shall be my gift to you tomorrow, Minnecoma, if I kill the panther."

He raised his hand and walked away. Hahatan nodded to Wonnewok's uplifted arm, and led Minnecoma in the other direction.

At dawn, on a rock by the water, Minnecoma sat and watched the two canoes dwindle in the distance. Behind her, in the village, the races began, and the games.

Hours later, she stood erect, then whirled and ran to her father's lodge. She came out in fresh, festival clothing, her face painted ceremoniously, her hair newly plaited, an ornamental dagger at her waist. Demurely she joined her father Hahatan.

"It is over," said Minnecoma.

Her father nodded, without asking how she knew. The bulky figure beside him turned, his voice booming above players' shouts.

"My son Wonnewok has slain the panther, then, my daughter?"

The girl lowered her eyelids respectfully. "It may be, O Pocomic," she replied.

Hahatan snapped a command. Two braves sped away. After a time, one came running back.

"Two canoes," he breathed. "A paddler in the first is towing the second."

Then the other brave ran up. "He who paddles is close to shore." He looked sidewise at Minnecoma. "In the second canoe lies a body."

Hahatan and Minnecoma stiffened, but Pocomic made no sign. Hahatan rose, waited for Pocomic to precede him down the slope to the lake. Silently Minnecoma joined them.

The paddler beached his canoe. He lifted a skin from its bottom, carefully holding the bloody, dripping pelt away from his glistening brown body. Two braves took a limp figure from the second canoe.

"O chiefs, I have killed the panther!" Triumphantly, Wonnewok dropped the pelt at Hahatan's feet.

Minnecoma spoke first. "And what of — him, O Wonnewok?"

Wonnewok glanced scornfully at Pierre Gaudin's body. "When I brought the skin to the canoes, this one was climbing a tree!" He frowned, and shrugged. "When I called to him, he fell. You see him?"

Minnecoma stooped over the body. "I see him." Her voice was cold, her face rigid. "He is dead. His head is bruised, his neck is broken . . . He does not wear his neck-piece."

Again Wonnewok shrugged. Minnecoma moved her hand lightly over Pierre Gaudin's body, then reached in under his tunic, and stood up

holding the white silk in her hand.

"It is stained," she said. "Scarlet."

"I do not understand the heart of this white man," said Wonnewok impatiently. "Why he climbed the tree, or why he removed his neck-piece. Perhaps he prayed thus."

The girl shook her head. "It was a sign," she said, and in the instant was upon him with drawn dagger. Once, twice, she struck. Wonnewok fell twitching to the ground, then lay unmoving.

"I claim vengeance, O chiefs!" panted Minnecoma. "Pierre Gaudin killed the panther, and skinned it. Wonnewok slew him and claimed it for himself!"

EDITORS' NOTE: *How did Minnecoma know of Wonnewok's crime? You now have all the facts necessary to unravel this early American folk-puzzle. If the answer eludes you (as it did us), you will find the solution below. Happy hunting!*

Grimly Pocomic drew his hatchet. "Hear me!" Minnecoma's voice rang out. "Pierre Gaudin was a man of ships, climbing safely on masts and sails in all weather. *He* would not slip on a tree-branch! It was to signal *me* that he climbed the tree and waved his neckpiece."

She took a deep breath. "See, O my father, and you, O Pocomic! Blood on the neckpiece of Pierre Gaudin! *Yet his body is not cut or gashed!* And see Wonnewok — clean and unstained, though he said *he* skinned the panther and carried it." She pointed to the pelt, still moist, and dampening the ground redly.

"Wonnewok never touched it, until he picked it up just now from the canoe. The blood on the neckpiece is the panther's, smeared upon it when Pierre Gaudin skinned and carried the pelt . . . He had not time to replace the neckpiece when he saw Wonnewok coming. He thrust it into his tunic, for it was to be my marriage gift, and climbed down. They fought, and Wonnewok crushed his head and broke his neck. O chiefs, I claim vengeance!"

Hahatan turned mutely to Pocomic. Slowly Pocomic opened his fingers, letting the hatchet fall and bury itself in the ground.

DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

Ruth Alix Ashen's "The Woman Who Was Afraid" is one of the eight "first stories" which won special awards in last year's contest. It is a penetrating character study in the difficult field of phobias, and from first word to last the author achieves mood, and a brooding quality of suspense. We expect great things from Miss Ashen in the future, and for reasons entirely apart from her natural, slowly evolving talent.

For consider: this story represents Miss Ashen's fifth version of her original basic theme. She tried to write the story first in 1943: this earliest attempt turned out to be an exercise, an imitation of Poe's "The Cask of Amontillado." The second version (which, incidentally, brought Miss Ashen her first rejection slip from EQMM) was an elaboration of the same approach, ending with the death of a minor character. The third version was a re-write of the second, but since Miss Ashen did not want to picture her woman-protagonist as an out-and-out madwoman, the intensity of the Poe model was lost; most readers reacted to this version with a puzzled "So what?"

In 1948 Miss Ashen tried again. This time she added the present man-protagonist, depicting him as a crippled veteran with "war nerves," whose function was to register the shock which the author was failing to create in the reader's mind. But still Miss Ashen was not satisfied. She felt that somehow she had neglected Stanislavsky's dramatic dictum — "Go all the way." So again she made changes, and when her fifth and final version was completed, Miss Ashen was surprised to discover (though she should not have been) that the woman-protagonist had emerged almost as mad as Poe's Fortunatus.

To the fifth version we awarded a special first-story award. Miss Ashen had been persistent, hadn't she? She had also been courageous and indomitable in her pursuit of form and technique, in her ceaseless striving to blend style and substance. Did we tell you that Miss Ashen had submitted a story to every one of EQMM's annual contests, that four consecutive failures had neither disheartened nor discouraged her? Perhaps we shouldn't say that Miss Ashen was never dismayed: after all, she is human, and the long road home tries the most tenacious of hearts, the most ambitious of minds. But she never gave up, and therein lies the secret of success. All you would-be writers, you would-be doers, take courage from Ruth Alix Ashen's courage . . .

Miss Ashen was born in Seattle in 1911. Her grandparents were pioneers who were forever moving on to the westernmost edge. In 1932 she was told that she was suffering from an advanced case of pulmonary tuberculosis,

and she has been fighting that battle, side by side with her literary battle, ever since. We cannot tell you the depth of our admiration for this woman who was not afraid . . . She once wrote to your Editors that she "would particularly like to be 'discovered' by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" . . . that she "would rather be first published by EQ than by anyone else." Our part, Miss Ashen, in publishing your first story is a very small and humble one; we are proud to have been the mere instrument of destiny — it is you who have done all that really counts.

THE WOMAN WHO WAS AFRAID

by RUTH ALIX ASHEN

MARTINE WHARTON had an unusual mannerism. She would raise her head with an awkward jerk, open her eyes, and stare straight ahead with wide unfocused pupils which seemed to see directly into some unfathomable darkness. Then, after a long moment, her large white eyelids would move down protectively — as if to shut the darkness away.

She was a tall woman — too tall, too heavy, too coarse. In the beginning Andrews was not much attracted to her physically, although he realized later on that she suited him well enough. He probably did not realize quite so clearly that he was the kind of man who tends to shy away from less obvious women. He distrusted in them the same devious type of mind he knew in himself.

Andrews saw Martine first in the bus station. Someone pointed her out to him: ". . . the Wharton woman, you know, wife of that fellow who jumped out of the tenth-story win-

dow." Andrews had a darting, peeping curiosity behind his scholarly appearance and his stiff, cool stare. He darted his eyes over the Wharton woman, stiffly and coolly, holding his lips tense while his mind peeped and pried at her secrets. He added up her shabby gloves, her baffled strained expression, her presence in a commuters' station, and agreed that the police theory was credible. Nicky Wharton's death might well have been suicide due to unsound finances.

Some weeks later Andrews happened to be caught in the late afternoon rush he always tried to avoid. He felt peevish and irritable, imagining a personal hostility in the jostling of the crowds, the narrowness of the passageways — even in the overhanging magazines clipped each by its corner above the newsstand in a long pointed frieze — a frieze which seemed to have a menacing quality, as if it might leap in the air and fall on him in a smothering rain of shiny food advertisements.

He pushed up the short ramp toward his gate. Beyond the bottleneck, the clustered units of the crowd broke apart and shot away in criss-crossing paths, making for the ticket barriers and the endless ranks of gray and white buses. In the hurrying, disappearing throng only one figure stood still.

Andrews saw a tall, impassive, big-bodied woman in a dowdy coat. As he came up he recognized her as Mrs. Wharton, and with quickening interest noted in her face the faint tightening of the wrong muscles that betrays the approach of panic. Just as he came in front of her, she jerked her head back and opened her eyes, and Andrews saw the shadowed, unfocused pupils. Her face had a stupid, vacant look. After a moment her lids came down and her whole figure seemed to waver — as if he were looking at it through a heat haze.

That was all Andrews saw — more, perhaps, than the next man would have seen. It was an odd trick, the startled jerk, the unfocused eyes, the reluctant lids drifting down to protect the woman from an invisible darkness.

For Andrews it was the sirens' song. The mannerism had a fascination he never tried to analyze, and that was the giveaway in itself, because he always had to analyze everything, to scrutinize it, to ticket it in the busy squirrel-hoard of his brain.

He scrutinized Martine's trick — that was why he married her, so that he could study it through to some conclusion — but he did not examine

his reason for giving it such importance and he did not reflect that there should have been a reason. It was the authentic sirens' song, and it came to Andrews in no more improbable form, perhaps, than it has come to other men.

On that first day it brought him up short, rocking with an ungainly double-step before Martine. He put out one hand and closed his fingers around her arm.

A little woman with frothy hair and sharp eyes, coming up quickly, knocked Andrews's hand aside and seized Martine's wrist. She spoke her name sharply in an impatient tone and glared at Andrews with suspicion.

Andrews flushed, a thin flush that barely stained his colorless cheeks but suffused his eyelids and made them sting. "Excuse me," he said stiffly. "I thought Mrs. Wharton seemed ill. I thought she might want me to call a doctor."

Martine shrugged her shoulders and looked from Andrews to the woman. He wondered if he saw a glint of calculation in her eyes before she dropped them. "I don't need a doctor," she said.

"I don't know what you're thinking of," snapped her companion at Andrews.

"It's just the crowds," muttered Martine, hunching her shoulders again. Her voice was flat, but there was a trace of whine in it. "I'm afraid of crowds. I've always been afraid of crowds."

"You're all right, Martine," said

her companion. "Go and get in the bus. It's right there. Go on."

Martine turned like a sleepwalker and moved toward the bus. The smaller woman stood her ground, looking at Andrews. He drew his head back. "Please ask Mrs. Wharton's pardon for me. I did not, of course, know that she suffered from agoraphobia."

The woman laughed with sudden full-throated amusement, her eyelids crinkling and her lips relaxed, but she kept her sharp eyes on Andrews's face. "The professor type — that's the line, is it?" Her tone was good-humored, but it sharpened to match her eyes. "Well, leave her alone. She's not a sideshow."

To Andrews she was more than a sideshow. As he came to know her, he was repelled by her heavy clumsy movements, by the drops of sweat that appeared too easily on her upper lip, by the sound of her breath when she made violent movements. He was even more repelled by her childish affectations of petulance and by her habit of complaining in a mincing self-satisfied tone.

But just when he was most repelled he would find himself fascinated and drawn back. The time would come when her head would jerk up, her eyelids raise — and lower. Again and again, between this woman who was so vulgar and obvious, and the man who was so prying and knowledgeable, would spread that thin drift of darkness, that film which was mystery, that secret which he could not pierce.

And he *had* to pierce it. What the cost might be to her he never considered; he was as blind on that score as if his consuming urge had been the secrets of her flesh instead of the secrets of her mind . . .

Andrews bought his card file the same day he bought the marriage license. He did not let Martine see it, and he did not try at first to make his observations more than casual. He made a heading for *Fear of Crowds*. He made more headings for her fears of heights, of cats, of sharp knives. His list grew as time went on. He began to separate her fears into genuine ones, which called up her peculiar mannerism, and false ones, which did not. Although he kept his materials of study out of her sight, he could not hide the direction of his interest, and he soon found that Martine was affecting new phobias, inventing them or picking them up from a friend's babble, a motion picture, a confession magazine. Sometimes she tried to affect the nervous start, too, so that the lists he made were always being shifted, the cards he filed, with their small clear notations on *Preliminary Conditions* and *Immediate Reactions*, were always being moved from the heading *False* to that of *True*, and back again.

He manufactured occasions with sly ingenuity, arranging controls as if for a chemist's experiment, and waited in fascination for that baffling suspension of time in the instant before her eyelids came down, in that

always brief moment while she stared into the unimaginable darkness.

Sometimes he questioned her. "What is it about a crowd that frightens you, Martine?"

"Just — people. I don't know."

"Are you always afraid of people? Are you afraid of me?"

"Don't be silly."

"Are you afraid of people?" he persisted. "Strange people, is that it?"

"No. I don't know."

"In a crowd are you afraid of being — assaulted?"

She flung back her shoulders with the arrogant scorn of the heavy-bodied. "You're a fool, Andy. I wish to Heaven you'd leave me alone. If you'd only leave me alone, maybe I'd get over it."

Andrews marked the reaction on the proper card, when he was by himself, and filed it under the appropriate heading.

He took Martine to every place he could think of, and the card file thickened. They went to night clubs, to the races, to theaters and motion picture houses, to the park, to lectures, into the streets to walk before the dawn. They visited the homes of Martine's friends, where Andrews was looked upon with ridicule and suspicion, and to the homes of his own friends where Martine acted sometimes bored and sometimes coy. When deer season opened in September, Andrews borrowed a cabin up-country and took his wife hunting.

The last move was carefully calculated. Andrews knew the hills and

cliff edge near the cabin, and he planned an experiment with Martine's fear of high places. He knew she connected it with the death of her first husband and that she felt a kind of complacency about the connection, as if Wharton's death-plunge had transformed her phobia into a delicate physical disability.

From the cabin Andrews led Martine up through the tall thin columns of second-growth oak and bay. The ground had a sparse litter of twigs and narrow yellow leaves, the sun in front of them outlined the straw-colored aureoles of dead thistle-heads, and here and there the red leaves of poison-oak burned from invisible stalks.

Their way led toward an outcropping of tawny rock. Jutting ledges thrust up square, blocky slabs which grew in height as they closed in on the path. Andrews, lowering his head and pretending to examine the rifle he carried, stopped as if by chance just short of a narrow passageway between the rock walls. Martine stepped through ahead of him.

She found herself on a three-foot ledge. It was wide, firm, and safe, sloping a little upward toward the edge and with a dry corrugated surface; but beyond it the cliff fell steeply and the sudden opening of the horizon on a wide treeless stretch of hills across the canyon added to the feeling of height. Andrews dropped his rifle silently beside the path and moved swiftly through the passage to come level with Martine.

Her head snapped back awkwardly and defensively, as he had expected. Instead of holding her usual immobility, she swung about, her wide darkened eyes moving from side to side and her mouth twisting in frantic grimaces. She snatched with one hand at the rocky barrier, pivoting against it in panic. Her desperate push sent her back through the passage to the hillside and down onto the ground. Her boots slipped and slid on the dead grass-clumps and she clutched at the earth with both hands, lying full length and writhing against it.

The fine dry grasses broke off in her clawing fingers. Dust and dead leaves streaked her jacket. Andrews stood over her, disconcerted but eagerly watchful. He spoke her name sharply. When he spoke to her a second time she lay still.

"It's all your fault," she said finally in a querulous voice. She sat up, brushing leaves and dust petulantly out of her mouth, and rubbed at her wet flushed cheeks. "You brought me here. You know I'm afraid of high places."

Andrews lied easily. "I didn't know about that ledge." He slid down in the opening between the rocks, leaning against one side and propping a foot against the opposite wall, so that he blocked the passageway with his body, arms resting loosely on his bent-up knee. "Don't you trust me, Martine? Don't you know I'll take care of you?"

Martine sat still, her legs sprawled in a ludicrous ungainly posture. She

pulled her mouth in, primly, and spoke in a mincing tone unsuited to her heavy, sweating features and the hysterical frenzy of her first reaction. "It's not my fault I'm like that. After all, I did see Nicky . . ." Her voice trailed away, thin and embarrassed. She brushed at the twill surface of her trouser leg with impatient taps. "When a person sees a thing like that, you can't expect her to be like other people. And I was always afraid of high places, anyway."

"Martine," said Andrews, not looking at her and keeping his tone colorless, "do you know that it might help you to talk about Wharton's accident? Do you know that other people like you have been helped by talking about such things?"

She looked at him as if he had offended her, pursed her lips, and looked away. "It wasn't an accident," she said sullenly after a moment.

"All right, suicide."

"I didn't mean suicide," she said scornfully. "Nicky didn't have the nerve. Anyway, he was always in and out of money trouble. Being broke wouldn't have bothered him any. Why, the way he was talking that night, you'd have thought he had at least an extra million kicking around."

"If it wasn't suicide it must have been accident."

She hunched her shoulders. "I don't call it accident when it's all your own fault. If Nicky had listened to me nothing would have happened at all." Her voice rose to the familiar whine of complaint. "I was afraid of

that window from the first time I saw it: I was always afraid of high places and the moment I saw that window I knew how easy it would be —"

"Why did you live where there was that kind of window?"

Martine's whine broke off. She drew up her knees, locked her arms around them and lowered her head, avoiding his eyes. "Why does anyone live anywhere? It was a good apartment. And the window didn't need to be opened. It never was before."

"Did you tell Wharton it made you nervous?"

"Of course I did. He knew it wasn't safe, without me telling him. Anybody could see that. It was like a door — it opened onto a narrow kind of balcony but the balcony wasn't to walk on, it was just for looks. I kept the window closed and put a table in front of it with one of those thingamajig lamps on it, the kind that has little crystal pieces hanging down around. Nicky didn't have any reason to move the table or the lamp."

The reiteration of the pet name irritated Andrews. "Too bad you weren't near enough to catch him when he went over."

A tremor went through Martine's bowed head and shoulders. For the first time, and with genuine amazement, Andrews felt compunction and, mixed with it, a sharp sympathetic awareness of the awkward stupid woman before him. He felt awkward himself, and tired. And for the first time he felt trapped by the flaw in her mind which gave her such indisputa-

ble claim to his patience. He forced his lips to relax. "It's all right, Martine. We won't talk about it if you don't want to."

She blinked her eyes, staring up at him, moving her head backward to avoid the sun. "But you said it would help. People have told me before that I could get over being afraid of high places. Is that true? If it hadn't been for Nicky, could I have got over being afraid?"

Andrews tried to answer honestly. "Forcing yourself too far can do more harm than good."

"I wondered." Martine leaned forward and stretched out one careful finger to stroke the flat silvery leaves of a whorled plant growing against the wall of rock. "It seems to me I'm worse since it happened."

"Of course you are. Good Lord, an accident like that . . ."

"It wasn't an accident." She sounded fretful. "He went out there on purpose. It wasn't even an accident that he'd drunk too much. I told him not to."

"So I suppose he stopped." Andrews's voice was sardonic.

"Why, no. Anything I told him, he did the opposite. But he was drinking too much and I thought how lucky it was the window was closed."

"What made him think of the window?"

Martine looked puzzled. "I don't know. What makes people think of things? I wouldn't have mentioned it, would I? Knowing how obstinate he was? But when he put his hand on

the latch, I told him not to open it. I told him not to go out on the balcony. It wasn't my fault. He should have kept the window closed. He should have stayed off the balcony when he'd been drinking. He shouldn't have *been* drinking. That's what I told him."

"But if you knew that nagging would only make him more obstinate —"

Martine flung her head back, dry-eyed and imperious. "What was I to do? Was I to tell him to drink himself blind and play the fool on the edge of a ten-story drop?"

Andrews felt an unexpected tumult of emotion. He forgot Martine had ever seemed clumsy or foolish. His eyes were on the hollow of her temple against the vivid line of hair-tendrils.

"From the time Nicky came in that night, it was his own fault. He was drinking and making fun of me. I didn't think anything of that, Lord knows. I'd had enough of that to be used to it. But when he made fun of me because I was afraid of the window, I couldn't stand it. I *was* afraid, so I couldn't stand him saying it. And then he made me go out on the balcony with him."

Andrews let out his breath harshly. "You went out — there?"

"Oh, yes. I went."

"But if you were as frightened —"

"Well . . ." She rubbed her hand self-consciously along her knee. "Nicky always acted so crazy when I wouldn't do what he said. And I'd heard that sometimes you could get

over being afraid if you forced yourself."

"Martine, don't talk about it if you don't want to."

She looked at him calmly, and he flushed. "You want me to talk about it, don't you?" she asked him. "Since the very first you've wanted me to. You never asked about Nicky, but that's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

It was true. From the very first he had wanted her to talk about Wharton. From the first moment of fantasy that made him picture her looking into a hidden darkness, he had wanted to know what was in that darkness, and from the very first he had believed that Wharton's name was the clue. And yet never, until now, had he been conscious of even the normal curiosity he might have expected to feel. Never before had he thought of Wharton as an actual person, as a man who could move about and direct his own movements.

Martine seemed confused, uneasy. "There's not much to tell, really. He didn't go over all at once. He was acting silly, leaning out over the railing to scare me. The railing wasn't very high and he stumbled and caught hold of it, only he was on the outside, on the little ledge. He wanted me to come closer and help him get back. I don't think he needed help. He knew I was afraid and he wanted to show off what he could make me do."

The picture appalled Andrews — the man trying a witless trick on the edge of nothing, the woman blinded by hysterical fear. No wonder she put

up her over-prompt defense of blaming Wharton. "Good God, didn't he have any sense?"

"He should have had, shouldn't he? Even if he was drunk?"

"What did you do?"

"What he told me to. I braced my feet and held out my arm so he could steady himself when he climbed back. He wasn't very tall. I was heavy enough to balance him when I was braced."

"And then you — what? Lost control of your arm? Fainted?"

"Oh, no. I was quite steady."

"What happened? How did he go over?"

Martine shook her head and pulled herself clumsily to her feet. "Oh, it's too horrid." She paced away on the path and back again. Her foot touched the rifle where Andrews had dropped it and her toe shoved it aside with a gesture which betrayed her agitation more than her carefully controlled pacing. She stood still and looked at him. Andrews straightened his back against the rock. He felt the sole of his foot burn as he pressed it against the opposite wall.

"It would have been all right," Martine protested. "Even if I was afraid, I wouldn't have trembled too much. I'm worse now, but I think it would have been all right then. Only he had to have the last word. He had to say the wrong thing."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'See, I told you so. I told you it would be easy.'"

"Well?"

She stared down at him somberly. "It's your own fault. You made me tell. Nobody ever needed to know, but you made me tell."

"Made you tell what? What's the matter, Martine?"

"It *was* easy."

"What?"

"Nicky was right. It *was* easy. I just snapped my arm down and he lost his balance. I didn't even have to push. I knew when I first saw that window how easy it would be. I've always been afraid of high places like that."

"Do you know what you're saying?" Andrews tried to stand up, but the space was too narrow and his foot, cramped from its tense position, slipped on the treacherous grass-clumps. In one quick, stooping movement Martine snatched up the rifle and swung it easily into place on her shoulder.

From his crouching, insecure position, with only the three-foot ledge behind him, Andrews stared in fascination at the dark circle that was the end of the gun barrel. His attention was caught by the sudden upward jerk of Martine's head, and he raised his eyes from the gun to the wide pupils of her unfocused eyes.

"I'm afraid of guns, too," whispered Martine. Her lips moved to hide a tiny complacent smile. "I've always been afraid of guns . . ."

This time her lids did not drift downward. Slowly the wide eyes focused. For the first time Andrews saw through the darkness into the mind he wanted to fathom . . .

THINKER-TO-LEVERS-TO-CHANCE

If the entire development of the modern detective story, from its birth in 1841 to the latest selections by the Mystery Guild, the Detective Book Club, and the Unicorn Mystery Book Club, had to be summarized in three words, the private-eye progress would best be characterized by the 'tec terms:

1. whodunit
2. howdunit
3. whydunit

The first stage — the whodunit — stressed pure puzzle. In this 'tec type, which has not only persisted through all succeeding periods but today shows signs of a major renaissance, the story usually opened with a provocative and puzzling crime situation, then brought on the detective (first the amateur and later, as realism reared its siren head, the professional), then spread into criminological investigation (including the discovery of clues and the cross-examining of suspects), then pointed the shifting fingers of suspicion, finally rose to the heights of deduction, and culminated in the exposure of the criminal and the solution of the mystery. As detective-story writers developed more and more ingenuity, they exploited the surprise ending (and the bigger the surprise the better) and rang the changes on the least-likely-criminal (and the least likely the better).

After half a century, the whodunit was joined by the howdunit, in which the emphasis swung from the identity of the murderer to the method by which the murder was committed. In the howdunit stage the so-called "medical mystery" gained much popularity, with cornerstone status usually accorded to Mrs. L. T. Meade's and Dr. Clifford Halifax's *STORIES FROM THE DIARY OF A DOCTOR* (1894 and 1896). After the turn of the century the simple "medical mystery" graduated to more complex "scientific detection" — in England with R. Austin Freeman's first Dr. Thorndyke book, *THE RED THUMB MARK* (1907), and in America with Arthur B. Reeve's first Craig Kennedy book, *THE SILENT BULLET* (1912). A perfect example of a contemporary blend of medical-mystery-and-scientific-detection is Lawrence G. Blochman's *DIAGNOSIS: HOMICIDE* (1950).

In 1912 R. Austin Freeman invented the "inverted" detective story, which led to such outstanding psychological studies of murder as Francis Iles's *BEFORE THE FACT* (1932), and which in turn led to the whydunit stage with which so many detective-story writers are currently preoccupied. In the whydunit the emphasis shifted again — from who-killed-Cock-Robin and how-was-Cock-Robin-killed to why-was-Cock-Robin-killed. This new approach is psychological and psychiatric (though it should be

pointed out that the scientifically psychological method of crime detection was first dealt with fictionally as long ago as 1910, in William MacHarg's and Edwin Balmer's THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF LUTHER TRANT). The whodunit does not attempt to find new motives for murder — there are no new motives; rather, it probes more deeply (and more dangerously) into even the oldest of criminological causes.

To illustrate this brief historical survey we now give you a 'tec triple-header — the whodunit, the howdunit, and the whydunit, all by expert practitioners in the fine art of fictional ferreting. The whodunit is a contemporary example, with emphasis on pure ratiocination. It is an original story written by Harry Kemelman whose "The Nine Mile Walk," a prize-winner in EQMM's Second Annual Contest, is still one of the best "first stories" we have ever published. And it is curiously fitting that this ultra-modern whodunit should revolve around a game of chess — for the whodunit has always been the so-called "chess problem" type of story, the intellectual challenge, the battle of wits between writer and reader. So, for the first of our triple entry, put on your 'tec thinking cap . . .

END PLAY

by HARRY KEMELMAN

IT WAS Friday, my regular evening for chess with Nicky, a custom begun when I had first joined the Law Faculty at the University and continued even after I had given up teaching to become County Attorney. I had just announced a mate in three more moves to win the rubber game of our usual three game match.

Nicky's bushy white eyebrows came together as he scrutinized the corner of the board where my attack was focused. Then he nodded briskly in admission of defeat.

"You might have prevented it," I offered, "if you had advanced the pawn."

"I suppose so," he replied, his little

blue eyes glittering with amusement, "but it would only have prolonged the game and the position was beginning to bore me."

Nicky, Nicholas Welt, Snowden Professor of English Literature at the university, could be the most exasperating of men. Although only two or three years my senior, he treated me with the condescending tolerance typical of a professor dealing with a Freshman of less than average intelligence. And I — perhaps because his prematurely white hair (my own was only just beginning to gray at the temples) and lined gnome-like face made him seem much older — I suffered it.

I was on the point of retorting that he was most apt to be bored by the position when he was losing, when the doorbell rang and I rose to answer it. It seemed as if I was always being interrupted whenever I had a chance to answer Nicky in kind.

My caller proved to be Colonel Edwards of Army Intelligence who was collaborating with me on the investigation of the death of Professor McNulty. Perhaps it would be fairer to say that we were both investigating the same case rather than that we were collaborating, for there had been an ill-concealed rivalry in our association from the beginning, and we had both gone our separate ways, each working on that phase of the problem that seemed to him most likely to bear fruit. True, we had agreed to meet in my office every morning and discuss our progress, but there was no doubt that each of us was as much concerned with being the first to solve the case as to bring it to a successful conclusion. Since I had had a conference with Colonel Edwards that morning and expected to have another the following morning, his appearance now gave me a vague feeling of uneasiness.

He was a young man, little more than thirty, entirely too young in my opinion to sport eagles. He was short and stocky with something like a strut in his walk, not uncommon in men of that build, and not necessarily indicating conceit. He was a decent chap, I suppose, and probably good at his job, but I did not warm to him

and had not from the beginning of our association some two days before. In part, this was due to his insistence, when we had first met, that he should have full charge of the investigation inasmuch as Professor McNulty had been engaged in research for the Army; in part, it was due to his insufferable arrogance. Although he was half a head shorter than I, he somehow contrived to look down his pudgy nose at me.

"I saw a light in your study as I was passing," he explained.

I nodded.

"I thought I'd like to go over certain points with you and get the benefit of your experience," he continued.

That was his usual style and it annoyed me because I was never quite sure whether this seeming deference was his idea of politeness or whether it was downright impudence, said with tongue in cheek. In any case, I did not take it at face value.

I nodded again and led him into the study where Nicky was putting the chessmen back in the box. After I had introduced the two men and we were all seated again, Edwards asked, "Have you uncovered anything important since this morning?"

It flitted across my mind that it was customary for the visiting team to go to bat first, but to have said so would have been to bring our antagonism out into the open.

"Well, we caught Trowbridge," I said. "We found him in Boston and brought him back."

"That was quick work," he said patronizingly, "but I'm afraid you're barking up the wrong tree."

I should have answered that with a shrug of the shoulders, but I felt that I had a strong case, so I said quietly, "He quarreled with McNulty some few hours before he was shot. McNulty had flunked him in his Physics course because he had not had his experiments for the semester done in time. He came to see him to explain that he had been handicapped because he had sprained his wrist and so had been unable to write. McNulty was upset and out of sorts that day. Never a very amiable man, he was downright nasty during the interview. I got that from his secretary who was sitting right outside the door of his office and heard most of it. She reported that McNulty had said point-blank that he thought Trowbridge was exaggerating his injury, and even suggested that the young man had managed to get a medical discharge from the Army by the same trick. Parenthetically, I might say, I checked the young man's Army record and found it excellent. He did not get his discharge until after he had been wounded in action twice. Naturally, Trowbridge did not take McNulty's sneer in silence. There was quite a row and the young man was heard by the secretary to say, 'You deserve to be shot.' " I paused impressively.

"Very well," I went on, "we know that Trowbridge took the 8:10 train to Boston. He had to pass McNulty's house on his way to the station and

that was no later than 8:05. According to Professor Albrecht, McNulty was shot at a minute or two after eight." I paused again to give added weight to the highly suggestive significance of the time elements. Then I said in quiet triumph, "Under the circumstances, I would say that Trowbridge was a logical suspect." I counted off the points on my fingers. "He quarreled with him and threatened him — that's motive; he had been in the Army and had fought overseas and so was likely to have a German Luger as a war trophy — that's weapon; he was near the house at the time — that's opportunity; and finally, he ran off to Boston — that's indication of guilt."

"But you don't shoot a professor because he flunks you in a course," Edwards objected.

"No, you don't ordinarily," I admitted. "But this is wartime. Values change. Trowbridge had fought overseas. I fancy he saw a lot of killing and came to have a much lower opinion of the sanctity of human life. Besides, flunking this course meant dropping out of college. He claims, as a matter of fact, that he came up to Boston to see about the chances of transferring to one of the colleges there. A nervous, sensitive young man could easily convince himself that his whole future had been ruined."

Edwards nodded slowly as if to grant me the point. "You questioned him?" he asked.

"I did. I didn't get a confession, if that's what you're thinking. But I

did get something. Knowing that he must have passed McNulty's house around 8:05, I told him that he had been seen there. It was just a shot in the dark, of course, and yet not too improbable. The Albany train pulls in around then and there are always two or three passengers who get off here. Going towards town, they'd be likely to pass him on his way to the station."

Edwards nodded again.

"It worked," I went on. "He got very red and finally admitted that he had stopped opposite McNulty's house. He said that he stood there for a few minutes debating whether to see him again and try to get him to change his mind. And then he heard the Albany train pulling in and knowing that the Boston train left soon after, he hurried off. I'm holding him as a material witness. I'll question him again tomorrow after he has spent a night in jail. Maybe I'll get some more out of him then."

Colonel Edwards shook his head slowly. "I doubt if you'll get any more out of him," he said. "Trowbridge didn't shoot him. McNulty shot himself. It was suicide."

I looked at him in surprise. "But we discarded the idea of suicide at the very beginning," I pointed out. "Why, it was you yourself who —"

"I was mistaken," he said coldly, annoyed that I should have mentioned it.

"But our original objections hold good," I pointed out. "Someone rang the doorbell and McNulty went to

answer it. Professor Albrecht testified to that."

"Ah, but he didn't. We *thought* he did. What Albrecht actually said was that McNulty excused himself in the middle of their chess game with some remark about there being someone at the door. Here, let's go over the whole business and you'll see how we made our mistake. Professor Albrecht's story was that he was playing chess with McNulty. I take it that's a common thing with them."

"That's right," I said, "they play every Wednesday night, just as Nicky and I do every Friday evening. They dine together at the University Club and then go on to McNulty's place."

"Well, they didn't this Wednesday," said Edwards. "Albrecht was detained by some work in the lab and went on out to McNulty's house afterwards. In any case, they were playing chess. You recall the arrangement of furniture in McNulty's study? Here, let me show you." He opened the brief-case he had brought with him and drew out a photograph of the study. It showed a book-lined room with an opening in the form of an arch leading to a corridor. The chess table had been set up near the middle of the room, just to the right of the arch. The photograph had evidently been taken from just below the chess table so that it clearly showed the chess game in progress, the captured men, black and white, lying intermixed on one side of the board.

He pointed to a chair that was drawn up to the chess table.

"This is where Albrecht was sitting," Edwards explained, "facing the arch which is the entrance from the corridor. The vestibule and the front door beyond is down the corridor to the left — that is, Albrecht's left from where he was sitting.

"Now, his story was that in the middle of the game McNulty went to answer the door. Albrecht heard what he later decided was a pistol shot, but which at the time he thought was a car backfiring outside. That's reasonable because the evidence shows that the gun was pressed tightly against McNulty's body. That would muffle the sound, like firing into a pillow. In any case, Albrecht waited a couple of minutes and then called out. Receiving no answer, he went out to investigate and found his friend lying on the floor of the vestibule, shot through the heart, the still warm gun in his hand." He addressed himself to me. "Is that the way Albrecht told it? Did I leave out anything?"

I shook my head, wondering what was coming.

He smiled with great satisfaction. "Naturally, on the basis of that story we immediately ruled out suicide. We assumed that the man who rang the doorbell had shot him, and then thinking that McNulty was alone, had put the gun in his hand to make it look like suicide. If the doorbell rang, it had to be murder and could not be suicide. That's logical," he insisted firmly as though still annoyed that I had attributed the discarding of the suicide theory to him. "Even if the

man who rang the doorbell had been a total stranger inquiring the way to the railroad station, say, it still could not have been suicide because it would have happened almost before the stranger could shut the door behind him and he would immediately have opened it again to see what the trouble was. It would have meant that McNulty had a loaded gun in his pocket all the time that he was playing chess with Albrecht. It would have meant —"

"All right," I interrupted, "the suicide theory was untenable. What made you change your mind?"

He showed some annoyance at my interruption, but suppressed it immediately. "The doorbell," he said solemnly. "There was something about Albrecht's story that didn't quite click. I took him over it several times. And then it came to me that at no time did he say that he had *heard* the doorbell — only that McNulty had excused himself with some remark about someone at the door. When I asked him point-blank if he had heard the bell, he became confused and finally admitted that he hadn't. He tried to explain it by saying that he was absorbed in the game, but it's a loud bell and if it had rung, I was sure he would have heard it. And since he didn't hear it, that meant it hadn't rung." He shrugged his shoulders. "Of course, if there were no third person at the door, the suicide theory had to be considered again."

He broke off suddenly. He blushed

a little. "You know," he said in great earnestness, "I haven't been completely frank with you. I'm afraid I misled you into thinking that I came down here solely to investigate McNulty's death. The fact of the matter is that I arrived in the morning and made an appointment by phone to meet him at his home at half-past eight that night. You see, the research project on which McNulty and Albrecht have been working hasn't been going too well. There were strange mishaps occurring all too frequently. Delicate apparatus that had taken weeks and months to replace was damaged. Reports that had been late coming in and frequently contained errors. Army Ordinance which was sponsoring the project asked us to check on the work and I was sent down to make the preliminary investigation.

"Having in mind now the possibility of suicide, I asked Albrecht about sabotage on the project. That broke it. He admitted that he had been suspicious of McNulty for some time and had conducted a little investigation of his own. Though he was certain that McNulty was guilty, he had hesitated to accuse him openly. But he had hinted. All through the game he had hinted that he knew what McNulty had been up to. I gathered that he couched his hints in the terms of the game. I don't play chess, but I imagine that he said something like, 'You will be in great danger if you continue on this line' — that kind of thing. After a while, McNulty got the

idea and became very upset. Albrecht said he murmured over and over again, 'What shall I do?' Then Albrecht made a move and said, 'Resign!' — which I understand is the regular chess term for 'give up'." Edwards spread his hands as though presenting us with the case all nicely gift-wrapped. "It was then that McNulty muttered something about there being someone at the door and got up from the table."

"Albrecht saw him shoot himself?" I demanded.

"All but. He saw McNulty go through the arch. Instead of going to the left to the vestibule, he went to the right, and that's where his bedroom is. I submit that he went to get his gun. Then he came back and walked past the arch to the vestibule."

"Why didn't he wait until after Albrecht left?" I asked.

"I suppose because he knew that I would be along presently."

There was little doubt in my mind that Edwards had arrived at the correct solution. But I hated to admit it. It was no longer a question of beating Edwards to the finish. I was thinking of McNulty now. He was not a friend, but I had played chess with him at the University Club a number of times. I had not cared too much for the man, but I did not like to think of him taking his own life, especially since it implied that he had been guilty of treason. I suppose my uneasiness and my doubts were patent in the very vehemence with which I tried to conceal them. "And that's

your case?" I demanded scornfully. "Why a Freshman Law student could pick it to pieces! It's as full of holes as a sieve."

He reddened, a little taken aback at the belligerence in my tone.

"Such as?" he asked.

"Such as the gun? Have you traced it to him? Such as why did Albrecht lie in the first place? Such as the choice of the vestibule? Why should a man with a house full of rooms choose to shoot himself in the vestibule?"

"Albrecht lied because McNulty was his friend," Edwards replied. "He could no longer affect the research project — why should he make him out a suicide and a traitor if he could avoid it? Besides, I guess he felt a little guilty about McNulty's taking his own life. Remember? He called on him to resign. I imagine he must have been pretty upset to find that his friend took his advice so thoroughly."

"And the gun?"

Edwards shrugged his shoulders. "You yourself pointed out that the gun was a war trophy. The country is flooded with them and very few of them have been registered. A former student might have given it to him. As a matter of fact, Albrecht admitted that McNulty had mentioned something of the sort some months back. No, the gun didn't bother me. I found the business of the vestibule a lot harder to understand — until I made a thorough check of the house. It appears that since the death of his wife some years ago, McNulty has prac-

tically closed up all the upper part of the house and part of the lower. So although there are six rooms in the house, he actually occupies what amounts to a small apartment on the first floor consisting of the study which was formerly the dining room, a bedroom, and the kitchen. He couldn't shoot himself in the study since Albrecht was there and would stop him. The kitchen leads off the study and I suppose he would not want to pass Albrecht if he could help it. That leaves only the bedroom, which I would consider the most likely place were it not for one thing: there's a large portrait of his wife hanging there. It was taken full view so that the eyes seem to follow you no matter from what angle you look at it. It occurred to me that it was that which deterred him. He wouldn't want to shoot himself under the very eyes of his wife, as it were. That's only a guess, of course," he added with something of a smirk which implied that in his opinion it was a pretty good guess.

"It's a theory," I admitted grudgingly, "but it's no more than that. You have no proof."

"As a matter of fact," he said slowly, a malicious little smile playing about the corners of his mouth, "I have proof — absolute proof. We're pretty thorough in the Army and some of us have had quite a bit of experience. You see, I did a paraffin test on McNulty — and it was positive."

I should have known that he had an ace up his sleeve. This time I made no effort to conceal my disappoint-

ment. My shoulders drooped and I nodded slowly.

"What's a paraffin test?" asked Nicky, speaking for the first time.

"It's quite conclusive, Nicky," I said. "I'm not sure that I know the chemistry of it exactly, but it's scientifically correct. You see, every gun no matter how well fitted has a certain amount of backfire. Some of the gunpowder flashes back and is embedded in the hand of the man that fires. They coat his hand with hot paraffin and then draw it off like a glove. They then test it for gunpowder — for nitrates, that is — and if it's positive, it means that the man fired the gun. I'm afraid that winds it up for McNulty."

"So the oracle of the test-tube has spoken?" Nicky murmured ironically.

"It's conclusive evidence, Nicky," I said.

"Evidence, eh? I was wondering when you would begin to examine the evidence," he remarked.

Edwards and I both looked at him, puzzled.

"What evidence have I neglected?" asked Edwards superciliously.

"Look at the photograph of the room," Nicky replied. "Look at that chess game."

I studied the photograph while Edwards watched uncertainly. It was not easy to see the position of the pieces because the ones nearest the camera were naturally greatly foreshortened. But after a moment I got the glimmering of an idea.

"Let's see what it looks like set

up," I said, as I dumped the chessmen out of the box onto the table and then proceeded to select the necessary pieces to copy the position indicated in the photograph.

Nicky watched, a sardonic smile on his lips, amused at my inability to read the position directly from the photograph. Edwards looked uneasily from one to the other of us, half expecting to find the name of the murderer spelled out on the board.

"If there is some sort of clue in those chessmen," he essayed, "in the way they're set up, I mean, we can always check the position against the original. Nothing was moved and the house is sealed."

I nodded impatiently as I studied the board. The pattern of the pieces was beginning to take on a meaning in my mind. Then I had it.

"Why, he was playing the Logan-Asquith Gambit," I exclaimed. "And playing it extremely well."

"Never heard of it," said Nicky.

"Neither did I until McNulty showed it to me about a week ago at the University Club. He had come across it in Lowenstein's *End Games*. It's almost never used because it's such a risky opening. But it's interesting because of the way the position of the bishops is developed. Were you thinking, Nicky, that a man who was upset and about to shoot himself would not be playing so difficult a game, nor playing it so well?"

"As a matter of fact, I was thinking not of the position of the pieces on the board," said Nicky mildly, "but of

those *off the board* — the captured men."

"What about them?" I demanded.

"They're all together on one side of the board, black and white."

"Well?"

Nicky's face was resigned, not to say martyred, and his tone was weary as he strove to explain what he thought should have been obvious.

"You play chess the way you write, or handle a tennis racket. If you're right-handed, you move your pieces with your right hand, and you take off your opponent's pieces with your right hand; and you deposit them on the table to your right. When two right-handed players like McNulty and Albrecht are engaged, the game ends with the black pieces that White has captured at his right and diagonally across the board are the white pieces that Black has captured."

There flashed through my mind the image of Trowbridge as I had seen him that afternoon, awkwardly trying to light a cigarette with his left hand because his right arm hung in a black silk sling.

"When a left-handed player opposes a right-handed player," Nicky went on, almost as though he had read my mind, "the captured men are on the same side of the board — but, of course, they're separated, the black chessmen near White and the white chessmen near Black. They wouldn't be jumbled together the way they are in the photograph unless —"

I glanced down at the board which I had just set up.

Nicky nodded as he would to a stupid pupil who had managed to stumble onto the right answer. "That's right — not unless you've dumped them out of the box and then set up only the men you need in accordance with the diagram of an end game."

"Do you mean that instead of playing a regular game, McNulty was demonstrating some special kind of opening?" asked Edwards. He struggled with the idea, his eyes abstracted as he tried to fit it into the rest of the picture. Then he shook his head. "It doesn't make sense," he declared. "What would be the point of Albrecht's saying that they were playing a game?"

"Try it with Albrecht," Nicky suggested. "Suppose it was Albrecht who set up the board?"

"Same objection," said Edwards. "What would be the point of lying about it?"

"No point," Nicky admitted, "if he set it up before McNulty was shot. But suppose Albrecht set up the game *after* McNulty was shot."

"Why would he do that?" demanded Edwards, his belligerence growing with his bewilderment.

Nicky gazed dreamily at the ceiling. "Because a game of chess partly played suggests first, that the player has been there for some time, at least since the beginning of the game, and second, that he was there on friendly terms. It is hardly necessary to add that if a deliberate attempt is made to suggest both ideas, the chances are that neither is actually true."

"You mean —"

"I mean," said Nicky, "that Professor Luther Albrecht rang McNulty's doorbell at approximately eight o'clock and when McNulty opened the door for him, he pressed a gun against his breast and pulled the trigger, after which he put the gun in the dead man's hand and then stepped over his fallen body and coolly set up the ever-present chessmen in accordance with the diagram of an end game from one of McNulty's many books on chess. That's why the game was so well played. It had been worked out by an expert, by Lowenstein probably in the book you mentioned."

We both, the Colonel and I, sat back and just stared at Nicky. Edwards was the first to recover.

"But why should Albrecht shoot him? He was his best friend."

Nicky's little blue eyes glittered with amusement. "I suspect that you're to blame for that, Colonel. You called in the morning and made an appointment for that evening. I fancy that was what upset McNulty so. I doubt if he was directly to blame for the difficulties encountered on the project, but as head of the project he was responsible. I fancy that he told his good friend and colleague, Albrecht, about your call. And Albrecht knew that an investigation by an outsider meant certain discovery — unless he could provide a scapegoat, or what's the slang expression? — a fall guy, that's it, a fall guy."

I glanced at Edwards and saw that he was pouting like a small boy with

a broken balloon. Suddenly he remembered something. His eyes lit up and his lips parted in a smile that was almost a sneer.

"It's all very pretty," he said, "but it's a lot of hogwash just the same. You've forgotten that I have proof that it was suicide. The paraffin test proved that McNulty had fired the gun."

Nicky smiled. "It's your test that is hogwash, Colonel. In this case it proves nothing."

"No, really," I intervened. "The test is perfectly correct."

"The test proves only that McNulty's hand was behind the gun," said Nicky sharply.

"Well?"

"Suppose someone rang your doorbell," Nicky addressed me, the same martyred look in his face, "as the Colonel did this evening, and when you opened the door, he thrust a gun against your breast. What would you do?"

"Why, I — I'd grab his hand, I suppose."

"Precisely, and if he fired at that instant, there would be nitrates back-fired into your hand as well as into his."

The Colonel sat bolt upright. Then he jumped up and grabbed his briefcase and made for the door.

"You can't wash that stuff off too easily," he said over his shoulder. "And it's even harder to get it off your clothes. I'm going to get hold of Albrecht and do a paraffin on him."

When I returned to the study from

seeing the Colonel to the door, Nicky said, "There was really no need for our young friend's haste. I could have offered him other proof — the chessmen. I have no doubt that the last fingerprint made on each chessman, black as well as white, will be found to be Albrecht's. And that would be a hard thing for him to explain if he persists in his story that it was just an ordinary game of chess."

"Say, that's right, Nicky. I'll spring that one on Edwards in the morning." I hesitated, then I took the plunge. "Wasn't Albrecht taking an awful chance though? Wouldn't it have been better if he had just walked away after shooting McNulty instead of staying on and calling the police and making up that story and —"

Nicky showed his exasperation. "Don't you see it? He couldn't walk off. The poor devil was stuck there. He had got McNulty's lifeless hand nicely fitted onto the gun. He was ready to leave. Naturally, he looked

through the door window up and down the street, normally deserted at that hour, to make sure the coast was clear. And he saw Trowbridge trudging along. He waited a minute or two for him to pass and then looked out again only to find that the young man had stopped directly across the street and gave no indication of moving on. And in a minute or two the passengers from the Albany train would be along. And after that, perhaps our friend the Colonel, early for his appointment."

"So my investigation of Trowbridge wasn't entirely fruitless, eh?" I exclaimed, rubbing my hands together gleefully. "At least, that puts me one up on the Colonel."

Nicky nodded. "A brash young man, that. What branch of the service did he say he was connected with?"

"Intelligence."

"Indeed!" Nicky pursed his lips and then relaxed them in a frosty little smile. "I was infantry, myself, in the last war."

There are only two books of short stories about Jacques Futrelle's The Thinking Machine. For this reason most detective-story readers (including most critics) have assumed that Jacques Futrelle wrote only two series of short tales about the querulous, massive-domed logician who insisted that in murder as well as in mathematics "two and two always make four — not some time but all the time."

Actually, Mr. Futrelle wrote four different series of shorts about The Thinking Machine. The first series consisted of ten stories, seven of which made up the first volume, THE THINKING MACHINE (1907); the other three stories in this earliest series have never been published in book form. The second series was composed of thirteen shorts and an introductory chapter relating how The Thinking Machine earned his sobriquet — all of

which became the second book, *THE THINKING MACHINE ON THE CASE* (1908).

The third series was the longest written by Mr. Futrelle — eighteen stories, of which we have printed three in EQMM — “*The Stolen Rubens*,” “*The Leak*,” and “*The Vanishing Man*” (published without the title, for the benefit of our contest-loving readers).

The fourth and last series was finished just before Mr. Futrelle’s tragic death in 1912 — a hero’s death on the sinking “*Titanic*.” This final series consisted of ten stories, four of which were left in London before Mr. and Mrs. Futrelle embarked on the “*Titanic*.” These four tales have survived. The other six were lost when the “*Titanic*” went down — lost forever. In recent years Mrs. Futrelle has tried to recall the titles and plots of the six lost stories, but somehow they remain a blind spot in her memory.

In addition, *The Thinking Machine* appeared in one short novel and in two novelettes (one of which is scheduled for EQMM in the near future) — thus, there are forty-eight tales of *The Thinking Machine* available to his earthly devotees and six to the denizens of the deep who prize them far beyond all pirates’ treasure. Yes, even in Davy Jones’s Locker their price is above rubies . . .

“*The Case of the Mysterious Weapon*” is one of the four surviving tales of the last series. It is a perfect example of the howdunit phase of detective-story history. So, for the second of our ’tec triple-play, concentrate on the mechanics of murder . . .

THE CASE OF THE MYSTERIOUS WEAPON

by JACQUES FUTRELLE

WITHIN the great room — dim, shadowy, mysterious as the laboratory of some alchemist of old, and foul with the pungent odors of strange chemical messes — there blazed a single light, a powerful electrical contrivance fitted with a reflector, and so shaded that its concentrated rays beat down fiercely on the work-table littered with scientific

apparatus. And bending over the table was a man, an almost pathetic little figure, slight to childishness, small of stature, attenuated. His hair was a straw-colored tatch thrown back impatiently from a dome-like brow, increasing in effect the abnormal size of his head. His eyes were narrow slits of pale blue, squinting petulantly through thick spectacles;

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his wizened, clean-shaven face was white with the pallor of the student; his mouth was a straight, bloodless line. His hands, busy now with microscopic labor, were slender and almost transparent under the blinding glare, and his fingers were long, sensitive, delicate.

The door opened and an elderly woman appeared with a tray.

"Some coffee and rolls, sir," she explained. "Really, you ought to have something."

"Put it down." The little man did not lift his eyes from his work; he spoke curtly.

"And if you should ask me, sir," the woman continued, "I'd say you ought to stop whatever you're a-doing, and take some rest, sir."

"Tut, tut, Martha!" the little man objected. "I've only just begun."

"You've been a-standing right there," Martha protested in righteous indignation, "ever since Sunday afternoon at four o'clock."

"What time is it now?"

"Ten o'clock, sir."

"That's only six hours, Martha."

"But it's Tuesday morning, sir!"

"Dear me, dear me!"

"And you haven't slept a wink, or eaten anything since —"

"Martha, you annoy me," the little man interrupted peevishly. "Run along and attend to your duties."

"But you can't keep a-going —"

"Very well, then," and there was a childish tone of resignation in his voice. "It's Tuesday, you say. Tell me when it's noon Wednesday."

Martha went out with a helpless shrug of her shoulders, leaving the little man alone. Hours passed. The coffee, untasted, grew cold. Motionless, the little man persisted in his labors with tense eagerness in his narrow eyes, oblivious alike of the more mundane things around him and of exhausted nature. The will beneath the straw-colored thatch knew no weariness.

This was The Thinking Machine — Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, Ph.D., F.R.S., M.D., LL.D., *etc.*, *etc.* — logician, analyst, worker of miracles in the exact sciences, intellectual wizard of his time; this master mind, exalted by the cumulative genius of generations gone before, which had isolated itself on a pinnacle of achievement through the sheer force of applied reason. Once he had been the controversial center of his profession, riding down the pet theories and tentative surmises and cherished opinions of others, and setting up instead precise facts, a few rescued from the chaos he had himself created, and more of his own uncovering. Now he was the Court of Last Appeal — in the sciences and in criminal mysteries, on both of which he had turned the light of cold logic with well nigh mathematical precision. "Logic is inexorable," maintained The Thinking Machine, and no greater proof of this assertion was possible than in the case which began with the death of the Honorable Violet Danbury, only daughter and sole heir of the late Sir Duval Danbury, of Leamington, Eng-

land — that singular series of events in which The Thinking Machine literally seemed to pluck the solution out of thin air.

Shortly after eleven o'clock on the morning of Thursday, May 4, Miss Danbury was found dead, sitting in the drawing room of an apartment she was temporarily occupying in a large and exclusive family hotel on Beacon Street. She was richly gowned, just as she had come from the opera the night before. Her bosom and arms were a-glitter with jewels. On her face, dark in death as are the faces of those who die of strangulation, was an expression of unspeakable terror.

Her parted lips were slightly bruised, as if from a light blow. In her left cheek was an insignificant bloodless wound. On the floor at her feet was a shattered goblet. There was nothing else unusual — no disorder, no sign of a struggle. Even the corsage of orchids she wore, although faded, was not crushed. Obviously she had been dead for several hours.

All these things considered, the snap judgment of the police — specifically, the snap judgment of Detective Mallory — was suicide by poison. Miss Danbury had poured some deadly drug into a goblet, sat down, drained it off, and died. Simple and obvious enough. But the darkness of her face? Oh, that! Probably some effect of a poison which Detective Mallory didn't happen to be acquainted with; the medical examiner would know. But it looked as if she might have been strangled! Pooh,

pooh! There were no marks on her neck, of fingers or anything else. Suicide, that's what it was — and the autopsy would disclose the nature of the poison.

The usual questions were asked and answered. Had Miss Danbury lived alone? No, she had a companion — a Mrs. Cecelia Davidson. Where was Mrs. Davidson? She had left the city the day before to visit friends in Concord and had left the address; the manager of the hotel had telegraphed the facts to her immediately. Miss Danbury had been found dead. No servants? No. Miss Danbury had availed herself of the service in the hotel. Who had last seen Miss Danbury alive? The elevator attendant the night before, when she had returned from the opera, about half-past eleven o'clock. Had she gone alone? No. She had been accompanied by Professor Charles Meredith, of the university. He had returned with her and left her at the elevator; she had gone to her apartment alone.

"How did she come to know Professor Meredith?" Mallory wanted to know. "Friend, relative?"

"I don't know," said the hotel manager. "She knew a great many people here. She'd only been in the city two months this time, but once, three years ago, she spent six months here."

"Any particular reason for her coming here? Business, for instance, or just a visit?"

"Just a visit, I imagine."

The front door of the hotel swung open, and there entered a man of

middle age, sharp-featured, rather spare, brisk in his movements, and distinctly well-groomed. He went straight to the desk.

"Will you please 'phone to Miss Danbury, and ask her if she will join Mr. Herbert Willing for luncheon at the country club?" he said. "Tell her I am below with my car and shall wait for her."

Both Mallory and the house manager turned and looked at him. The young man at the desk glanced at the detective blankly. Mr. Willing rapped upon the desk sharply.

"Well, well?" he demanded. "Are you all asleep?"

"Good morning, Mr. Willing," Mallory greeted him.

"Hello, Mallory." Mr. Willing turned to the detective. "What are you doing here?"

"You don't know that Miss Danbury is" — the detective paused and, evidently, changed what he had started to say — "is dead?"

"Dead!" Mr. Willing gasped. "Dead!" he repeated incredulously. "What are you talking about?" In his astonishment he seized Mallory by the arm and shook him. "Miss Danbury is —"

"Dead," the detective assured him. "She probably committed suicide. Everything points to it. She was found in her apartment two hours ago."

For half a minute Mr. Willing continued to stare at Mallory as if without comprehension, then he dropped weakly into a chair and closed his

eyes. Mallory had begun to think he had passed out, when he opened them; there was deep grief in them, and his keen face was drawn.

"It's my fault," he said simply. "I feel like a murderer. I gave her some bad news yesterday, but I didn't dream she would —" He stopped.

"Bad news?" Mallory urged.

"I've been doing some legal work for her," Mr. Willing explained. "She's been trying to sell a huge estate in England, and just at the moment the deal seemed assured, it fell through. I — I suppose it was a mistake to tell her. This morning I received another offer from an unexpected source, and I came by to tell her of it — and to take her to luncheon for a mild celebration of the good news." He stared at Mallory for a moment without speaking. "I feel like a murderer!" he said again.

"But I don't understand why the failure of a deal —" the detective began. He shook his head. "She was rich, wasn't she? What did it matter particularly if a deal did fail?"

"Rich, yes, with jewels and estates — but she was land poor," the lawyer explained. "The estates to which she held title were frightfully involved. She had magnificent jewels, gowns, and all those things, but see how simply she lived. She was actually in need of money. It would take me an hour to make you understand. How did she die? When? What was her manner of death?"

Detective Mallory told him the facts he had, and the lawyer sat clasp-

ing and unclasping his hands, trying to comprehend. At last it was decided that Mallory should go with him to see Professor Meredith.

"I don't know what good it will do," Mr. Willing said, "but Professor Meredith may be able to tell us something that will lead us to—" He looked at Mallory hopefully.

"We'll see him together," Mallory agreed.

They drove away in Mr. Willing's car . . .

Professor Meredith seemed greatly shocked. He explained to them that his acquaintance with Miss Danbury dated some weeks back. He had met her through some musical English friends, and friendship had grown out of the meeting through a mutual love of music. He had taken Miss Danbury to the opera half a dozen times. He could not say he knew her intimately, but he did not believe she would kill herself.

"It's suicide all right," the detective declared as they came away. "Suicide by poison. That's obvious."

On the following day he discovered for the first time that the obvious is not necessarily true. The autopsy revealed absolutely no trace of poison, either in the body or clinging to the shattered goblet; the broken glass had been carefully gathered up and examined. The heart was normal, showing neither constriction nor dilation, as would have been the case if poison had been swallowed, or even inhaled.

"It's the small wound in her cheek,

then," Mallory asserted. "Maybe she *didn't* swallow or inhale poison — she injected it into her blood through that wound."

"No," one of the examining physicians pointed out. "If she had, the heart would have shown either constriction or dilation. Besides, that wound was made after death. That is proved by the fact that it did not bleed." His brow clouded in perplexity. "There doesn't seem to be the slightest reason for that wound, anyway. It's really a hole, you know. It goes straight through her cheek. It looks as if it had been made with a large old-time hat pin."

The detective was staring at him. If that wound had been made after death, certainly Miss Danbury didn't make it — she had been murdered! And not murdered for robbery; she still had on her jewels, and nothing in the room had been disturbed.

"Straight through her cheek," Mallory repeated blankly. "Say, if it wasn't poison then what killed her?"

The three examining physicians exchanged glances.

"I don't know that I can make you understand," said one. "She died of absence of air in her lungs, if you follow me."

"Absence of air — well, that's illuminating!" The detective looked from one to the other. "You mean she was strangled, or choked to death?"

"I mean precisely what I say," the physician replied. "She was not strangled — there is no mark on her throat. Or choked — there is no obstruction

in her throat. Literally, she died of absence of air in her lungs."

Mallory stood glowering at them. A fine lot of physicians they were! Unless they were trying to spoof him —

"Let's understand one another," he said. "Miss Danbury did not die a natural death?"

"No!" they all agreed emphatically.

"She wasn't poisoned? Or strangled? Or shot? Or stabbed? Or run over by a truck? Or blown up by dynamite? Or kicked by a mule? And," he concluded, "she didn't fall from an airplane?"

"No."

"In other words, she just quit living?"

"Something like that," one of the physicians admitted. He seemed to be seeking a means of making himself more explicit. "You know the old nursery theory that a cat will suck a sleeping baby's breath?" he asked. "Well, the death of Miss Danbury was like that, if you understand. It is as if some great animal or — or thing had —" He stopped.

Detective Mallory was an able man — the ablest in the bureau of criminal investigation — but a yellow primrose by the river's brim was to him a yellow primrose, nothing more. Not that he lacked imagination, he just saw things as they were. His business was dealing in facts, plain everyday United States facts, vital facts. Now the only vital fact he had to go on was that Miss Danbury was dead — murdered — in some mysterious, uncanny way. Vampires were something like

that, weren't they? He shuddered a little.

"Regular vampire sort of thing," the youngest of the three physicians remarked, echoing the thought in the detective's mind. "They're supposed to make a slight wound, and —"

Mallory didn't hear what else was said. He turned abruptly and left the room.

On the following Monday morning, one Henry Sumner, a longshoreman, was found dead sitting in his squalid room on Atlantic Avenue. On his face — dark in death as are the faces of those who die of strangulation — was an expression of unspeakable terror. His parted lips were slightly bruised as if from a slight blow; in his left cheek was an insignificant bloodless wound. On the floor at his feet was a shattered drinking glass.

It was Hutchinson Hatch, newspaper reporter, who brought this double mystery to the attention of The Thinking Machine. Martha, the eminent scientist's only servant, admitted the newspaperman and he went straight to the laboratory. As he opened the door The Thinking Machine turned testily from his worktable.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Hatch. Glad to see you. Sit down. What is it?" That was his idea of extreme cordiality.

"If you can spare me five minutes?" the reporter began apologetically.

"What is it?" repeated The Thinking Machine without raising his eyes.

"I wish I knew," the reporter said.

"Two persons are dead — two persons as widely apart as the poles in social position — have been murdered in precisely the same manner, and it seems impossible that —"

"Nothing is impossible," The Thinking Machine interrupted, in the tone of perpetual irritation that seemed to be a part of him. "You annoy me when you say it."

"It seems highly improbable," Hatch corrected himself, "that there can be the remotest connection between the crimes, and yet —"

"You're wasting words," the crabbed little scientist declared impatiently. "Begin at the beginning. Who was murdered? When? How? Why? What was the manner of death?"

"I'll answer the last question first," the reporter said. "It is the most singular part of the problem. No one can explain the manner of death, not even the physicians."

"Oh!" For the first time The Thinking Machine lifted his petulant, narrowed eyes and stared into the face of the newspaperman. "Oh!" he said again. "Go on."

As Hatch talked, the lure of a material problem laid hold of the master mind, and after a little while The Thinking Machine dropped into a chair. With his great, grotesque head tilted back, his eyes turned steadily upward, and slender fingers placed precisely tip to tip, he listened in silence to the end.

"We come now," said the newspaperman, "to the inexplicable after

developments. We have proved that Mrs. Cecelia Davidson, Miss Danbury's companion, did *not* go to Concord to visit friends; as a matter of fact, she is missing. The police have not been able to find a trace of her and today are sending out a general alarm. Naturally, her absence at this particular moment is suspicious. It is possible to conjecture her connection with the death of Miss Danbury, but what about —"

"Never mind conjecture," the scientist broke in curtly. "I want facts, facts!"

"Further," and Hatch's bewilderment was evident in his face, "mysterious things have been happening in the rooms where Miss Danbury and this man Henry Sumner were found dead."

"What mysterious things?" asked The Thinking Machine.

"Miss Danbury was found dead last Thursday. Immediately after the body was removed, Detective Malory ordered her room locked, his idea being that nothing should be disturbed, at least for the present, because of the strange circumstances surrounding her death. When he learned the manner of Henry Sumner's death, and recognized the similarity in the two cases, he ordered his men to lock up Henry Sumner's room too."

Hatch stopped and stared into the pallid, wizened face of the scientist hopelessly. But The Thinking Machine said nothing.

"Tuesday night, identically the

same thing happened in each place," Hatch went on. "Miss Danbury's room was entered and ransacked; and some time that night Henry Sumner's room was also entered and ransacked. This morning, Wednesday, a clearly defined handprint in blood was found in Miss Danbury's room. It was on the wooden top of a dressing-table. It seemed to be a woman's hand. Also, a smudge of blood, which may have been a handprint, was found in Henry Sumner's room." He paused. The Thinking Machine's countenance remained inscrutable. "What possible connection can there be between this aristocratic young woman and this — this longshoreman? Why should —?"

"What chair," The Thinking Machine wanted to know, "does Professor Meredith hold in the university?"

"Greek," Hatch told him.

"Who is Mr. Willing?"

"One of the leading lawyers of the city. A man of excellent reputation and unblemished personal character."

"Did you see Miss Danbury's body?"

"Yes."

"Did she have a large mouth or a small mouth?"

The irrelevancy of the last question brought a look of astonishment to Hatch's face, and he was seldom astonished by the curious methods of The Thinking Machine. He had found that the scientist always approached a problem from a new angle, but these questions —

"I should say a small mouth," he ventured. "Her lips were bruised as

if — as if something round, say a twenty-five-cent piece, had been crushed against them. There was a queer, drawn, caved-in look to her mouth and cheeks."

"Naturally," commented The Thinking Machine enigmatically. "And Sumner's was the same?"

"Precisely. You say 'naturally.' Do you mean —" There was eagerness in the reporter's face.

"One moment, please." For half a minute The Thinking Machine continued to stare into nothingness. At last he said, "I daresay Sumner was of the English type? His name is English."

"Yes; a splendid physical man, a hard drinker, I hear, as well as a hard worker."

Again a pause.

"You don't happen to know if Professor Meredith is now or ever has been particularly interested in physics — that is, natural philosophy?"

"I do not."

"Please find out immediately," the scientist directed tersely. "Willing has handled some legal business for Miss Danbury. Learn what you can from him to the general end of establishing some connection, a relationship possibly, between Henry Sumner and the Honorable Violet Danbury. That is the most important thing to do now. Neither of them may have been aware of such a relationship, and yet it may have existed. If it doesn't, there's only one answer to the problem."

"And that is?" Hatch asked.

"The murders are the work of a madman. There's no mystery; of course, in the manner of deaths of these two."

"No mystery?" the reporter echoed blankly. "Do you mean you know how they —"

"Certainly I know, and you know. The examining physicians know, only they don't know that they know." Suddenly his tone became didactic. "Knowledge that can't be applied is utterly useless," he said. "The real difference between a great mind and a mediocre mind is only that a great mind applies its knowledge." He was silent a moment. "The only problem remaining in this case is to find the person who was aware of the many advantages of this method of murder."

"Advantages?" Hatch was puzzled.

"From the viewpoint of the murderer there is always a good way and a bad way to kill a person," the scientist told him. "This particular murderer chose a way that was swift, silent, simple, and as sure as the march of time. There was no scream, no struggle, no pistol shot, no poison to be traced, nothing to be seen except —"

"The hole in the left cheek?"

"Quite right, and that leaves no clue. As a matter of fact, the only clue we have at all is the certainty that the murderer, man or woman, is well acquainted with physics, or natural philosophy."

"Then you think that Professor Meredith —"

"I think nothing," The Thinking Machine declared. "I want to know

what he knows of physics, as I said, and I want to know if there is any connection between Miss Danbury and the longshoreman. If you'll get me that information —"

The laboratory door opened suddenly and Martha entered, pale, frightened, her hands shaking.

"Something most peculiar, sir," she stammered in her excitement.

"Well?" the little scientist asked irritably.

"I do believe," said Martha, "that I'm a-going to faint!"

And she did, crumpling up in a little heap before their astonished eyes.

"Dear me! Dear me!" exclaimed The Thinking Machine petulantly. "Of all the inconsiderate things! Why couldn't she have first told us what she had to say?"

It took ten minutes to bring Martha around; weakly she explained what had happened. She had answered the ring of the telephone, and someone had asked for Professor Van Dusen. She wanted to know the name of the person speaking.

"Never mind that," came the reply. "Is he there? Can I speak to him?"

"You'll have to explain what you want, sir," Martha had told him. "He always has to know."

"Tell him I know who murdered Miss Danbury and Henry Sumner," he then said. "If he'll see me I'll be right up."

"And then, sir," Martha explained to The Thinking Machine, "some-

thing must have happened at the other end. I heard another man's voice quite plain, then a sort of choking sound, sir, and then he cursed me, sir. I didn't hear any more. They hung up the receiver or something, sir." She paused indignantly. "Think of him, sir, a-swearing at me!"

For a moment the eyes of the two men met; the same thought had come to them both. The Thinking Machine voiced it.

"Another one!" he said. "The third murder!"

He turned abruptly and went out of the room; Martha followed him, grumbling. Hatch shuddered a little and waited. The hands of the clock went on to half-past seven. At eight the scientist came back to the laboratory.

"That ten minutes Martha was unconscious probably cost a man's life. Certainly it lost us an immediate solution of the riddle," he declared peevishly. "If she had told us before she fainted, the operator would have remembered the number calling; I have an arrangement with the telephone company. As it is, there have been dozens of calls since and, of course, there is no record of this one." He spread his slender hands helplessly. "The manager is trying to have the number traced. We'll know tomorrow. Meanwhile, try to see Mr. Willing tonight and find out what relationship, if any, existed between Miss Danbury and Sumner. And see Professor Meredith."

The newspaperman telephoned to

Mr. Willing's home in Newton to find out if he was in; he was not. On a chance that he might be at his office he telephoned there. He hardly expected an answer at that hour and he got none. So it was not until four o'clock in the morning that the third tragedy in the series came to light.

A scrubwoman employed in the building where Mr. Herbert Willing had his law offices entered the suite to do the cleaning. She found Mr. Willing there, gagged, bound hand and foot and securely lashed to a chair. He was alive but apparently unconscious from exhaustion. Directly facing him his secretary, Maxwell Pittman, sat dead in his chair. On his face — dark in death as are the faces of those who die of strangulation — was an expression of unspeakable horror. His parted lips were slightly bruised as if from a light blow; in his left cheek was an insignificant bloodless wound.

Within a half-hour Detective Malloy was on the scene. By that time Mr. Willing, under the influence of stimulants, was able to talk.

"I have no idea what happened," he explained. "It was after six o'clock, and Mr. Pittman and I were alone finishing up some work. He had gone into another room for a moment and I was at my desk. Someone entered. I thought it was Pittman. Whoever it was crept up behind me and covered my face with a drugged cloth. I tried to shout and must have struggled, but everything grew black. And that is all I know. When I came to and could

think, poor Pittman was there, just as you see him."

Mallory, in searching the offices for a clue to the murderer, came upon what must have been the drugged cloth. It was an expensive linen handkerchief. As he examined it he was aware of a strong odor of some sort of drug. In one corner of the handkerchief was a monogram.

"C. D." he read. "Cecelia Davidson!"

Later Hutchinson Hatch burst in upon The Thinking Machine in his laboratory.

"There *was* another," he announced.

"I know it." The Thinking Machine was still bent over his worktable. "Who was it?"

"Maxwell Pittman, Willing's secretary." And Hatch related the story.

"There may be two more," the scientist remarked.

"Two more?" Hatch gasped in horror.

"One may be Cecelia Davidson. Please call a taxi at once!"

Together they were driven to the university, and were received by Professor Meredith in his study. Professor Meredith plainly showed his astonishment at the visit, and astonishment became indignant amazement at the scientist's first question.

"Mr. Meredith, can you account for every moment of your time from mid-afternoon yesterday until four o'clock this morning?" The Thinking Machine asked him flatly. "Don't misunderstand me — I mean every moment of the time in which it is pos-

sible that Maxwell Pittman was murdered."

"Why, it's a most outrageous —" Professor Meredith exploded.

"I'm trying to save you from arrest," the scientist explained curtly. "If you can account for all your time, and prove your statement, please believe me when I tell you you had better be prepared to do it. Now, if you can give me any information about —"

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Professor Meredith. "What do you mean by daring to suggest —?"

"My name is Van Dusen," said The Thinking Machine, "Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen. Long before your time I held the chair of philosophy in this university. I vacated it by request. Later the university honored me with a degree of L.L.D."

The result of this information was astonishing. In the presence of The Thinking Machine, Professor Meredith was a different man.

"I beg your pardon, Professor Van Dusen," he said. "What can I tell you?"

"I am curious to know if you are at all acquainted with Miss Danbury's family history," the scientist went on. "Meanwhile, Mr. Hatch, take the taxi and go measure the precise width of the bruise on Pittman's lips. And see Mr. Willing, if he is able to see you. Ask him what he can tell you of Miss Danbury's family history — I mean her family, her property, her connections, all about her personal life. Meet me at my house in an hour."

Hatch went out leaving the two men together. When he reached the scientist's home an hour later he found The Thinking Machine coming out.

"I'm on my way to see Mr. George Parsons, the so-called copper king," he explained. "Come along. I may need you."

From that moment came several developments so curious and bizarre, and so widely disassociated, that Hatch could make nothing of them. Nothing seemed to fit into anything else. For instance, The Thinking Machine's visit to the office of Mr. Parsons.

"Please ask Mr. Parsons if he will see Mr. Van Dusen," he said to Mr. Parsons' secretary.

"What about?" the query came back from Mr. Parsons.

"A matter of life and death," the scientist's answer went back to the copper king.

"Whose?" Mr. Parsons wanted to know.

"His!" The Thinking Machine was equally curt.

Immediately he was admitted to the inner office. Ten minutes later he came out and beckoned Hatch to follow him. They took a taxi to the shopping district and had it stop at a toy shop, where The Thinking Machine bought a small, high-grade rubber ball; later at a flower shop, where he purchased a vicious-looking corsage pin.

"You failed to tell me, Mr. Hatch, the measurements of the bruise."

"Precisely one and a quarter inches."

"Thanks. And what did Mr. Willing say?"

"I didn't see him. I have an appointment with him in an hour."

"Good." The Thinking Machine nodded his satisfaction. "When you see him please tell him that I know — I *know*; do you understand? — who killed Miss Danbury, Sumner, and Pittman. You can't make it too strong — I *know*!"

"Do you know?" Hatch demanded quickly.

"No," the scientist admitted frankly. "But convince Willing that I do. And tell him that tomorrow at noon I shall give the extraordinary facts I have gathered about the murders to the police. *At noon!* You must impress on him that I know *without any possibility of doubt* who committed the murders!" He was thoughtful for a moment. "You might add that I have told you that the guilty person is of high position and his name has not yet been connected with the crimes — unpleasantly. You don't know his name — no one knows except myself. And I shall tell the police at noon tomorrow."

"Any other instructions?"

"Come to my house early tomorrow morning, and bring Mr. Mallory."

Events were cyclonic that last morning. Mallory and Hatch had hardly arrived when there came a telephone message from police headquarters for Mallory. Mrs. Cecelia Davidson was there, had come in voluntarily, but refused to talk to anyone at headquarters except Mallory.

"Don't rush me off now, Mr. Mallory. It is important that I stay here." The Thinking Machine was pottering around among the retorts and microscopes and whatnots on his work-table. "Have Mrs. Davidson detained until you get there. Ask her what relationship there was between Miss Danbury and Henry Sumner." The detective went out and the scientist turned to Hatch. "Here is a corsage pin," he said. "Some time this morning before noon we will have a most important caller. If, when that person is in this room I put anything to my lips — a bottle, for example — or anything is forced upon me and I do not remove it in precisely thirty seconds, you will thrust this pin through my cheek. Don't hesitate."

"Thrust it through your cheek?" the reporter repeated. An unpleasant chill ran over him as he realized the scientist's meaning. "Is it absolutely necessary to take such a chance to —?"

"I say if I don't remove it!" The Thinking Machine interrupted. "You will be watching from another room, and Mallory, too, if he returns in time. I shall demonstrate the exact manner of the murders and I want you to witness it." He saw the troubled look on the reporter's face. "I shall be in no danger," he said simply. "The pin is merely a precaution if anything should go wrong."

It was not long before Mallory came back, scowling.

"I have talked with Mrs. Davidson," he said. "She denies that she

committed the murders, but admits that the handprints in the blood on the dressing-table might be hers. According to her yarn, she searched Miss Danbury's room after the murder to find family papers she said were necessary to establish claims to some estate over in England. I couldn't make head or tail of it. While searching, nervous and in a hurry, she hurt her hand on a pair of scissors on Miss Danbury's dressing-table and it bled a lot, she said. She thought that may account for the handprint. After she had searched at the hotel she went to Sumner's room and admits she might have left the smudge there."

"Did you ask her about the relationship?" the scientist asked.

"Yes, it seems that Sumner was a distant cousin of Miss Danbury's. The only son of a younger brother who ran away after some sort of a wild escapade and came to this country. George Parsons, the copper king, is the only other relative. Mrs. Davidson insisted that we warn him to be on his guard — she seems to think he will be the next victim. That's why she came to headquarters — to ask the police to warn him."

"He's already warned," said The Thinking Machine, "and has gone West on important business."

Mallory stared.

"You seem to know more about this case than I do."

"I do," the scientist admitted, "quite a lot more."

"I think Mrs. Davidson will change her story when she has had time to

think it over behind bars," the detective declared. "Perhaps she will remember better when —"

"She is telling the truth."

"Truth! Then why did she run away? How was it we found her handkerchief in Willing's office saturated with a drug after Pittman was murdered and Willing tied up? How was it —"

The Thinking Machine shrugged. "All in good time, Mr. Mallory."

The door of the laboratory opened and Martha appeared, her eyes blazing with indignation.

"The man who swore at me over the telephone," she said, "wants to see you, sir."

Mallory's keen eyes swept the faces of the scientist and the reporter trying to fathom the strange change that had come over them.

"You are sure, Martha?" asked The Thinking Machine.

"Indeed I am, sir! I'd never forget that voice, sir, a-swearing at me that way. I'd know it in a million, sir. When I opened the front door I knew it the minute he spoke. He didn't say who he is, but I know his voice."

"I know who he is," The Thinking Machine said. "Show him in, Martha." When Martha went out he turned to the detective and Hatch. "You will wait in the next room. If anything happens, Mr. Hatch, remember my instructions."

The Thinking Machine was sitting with fingers tip to tip when the visitor entered. He was a man of middle-age, sharp featured, rather spare, brisk in

his movements, and distinctly well-groomed. He was Mr. Herbert Willing, attorney. In one hand he carried a small bag. He paused an instant and looked at the diminutive scientist curiously.

"Come in, Mr. Willing." There seemed to be no doubt in the mind of The Thinking Machine who his visitor was. "You want to see me about —?" He paused questioningly.

"I understand," said the lawyer, "that you have interested yourself in the solution of these — er — remarkable murders, and there are some points I should like to discuss with you. I have some papers in my bag which" — he opened it — "may be of interest. A newspaperman — er — told me that you have certain information —"

"I know the name of the murderer," said The Thinking Machine.

"Indeed! May I ask his name?"

"You may. And I notice you think the murderer is a man. You are right. His name is Herbert Willing."

Hatch, watching from the other room, saw The Thinking Machine pass his hand slowly across his mouth as if to stifle a yawn; saw Willing leap forward suddenly with a bottle in his hand; saw him force the scientist back against his chair and thrust the bottle against his lips. Instantly came a sharp click, and a hideous change came over the scientist's wizened face. His eyes opened wide in terror, his cheeks seemed to collapse. Instinctively he grasped the bottle with both slender hands.

After a scant second Willing swiftly took something else from the small bag and smashed it on the floor.

It was a drinking glass!

The scientist calmly removed the bottle from his lips.

"The drinking glass," he said, "completes the evidence."

Hutchinson Hatch was lean and wiry and as hard as nails; Detective Mallory's bulk concealed muscles of steel; yet it took both of them to overpower the attorney. Heedless of the struggling trio, The Thinking Machine sat curiously scrutinizing the bottle in his hand. The mouth of it was blocked by a small rubber ball. He had thrust the rubber ball against it with his tongue just a fraction of an instant before the dreaded power which the bottle held had been released by Willing — released by pressing a cunningly concealed spring. When at last he raised his squinting eyes, Willing, manacled, was glaring at him in unconcealed rage.

Fifteen minutes later the four of them were at police headquarters; Mrs. Davidson was waiting.

"Mrs. Davidson," The Thinking Machine demanded, "why didn't you go to Concord as you said you would?"

"I did go there," she told him. "But when the news came of Miss Danbury's terrible death I was frightened. I thought I would be implicated and I lost my head. I pleaded with my friends not to let anyone know I was there until I could plan something, think things over, and

they agreed. If anyone had searched their house, of course I should have been found. I was frantic. I knew that George Parsons was in terrible danger after the death of poor Sumner. At last, I could stand it no longer. I came immediately to headquarters to explain everything I know in connection with this awful tragedy."

"And the search you made of Miss Danbury's room, and of Henry Sumner's room?"

"I have explained that to Mr. Mallory," she said. "I knew Violet Danbury and Henry Sumner were cousins, and I knew that each of them had certain papers of value toward establishing their claims to a great estate in England now in litigation. I was sure those papers would be of value to the other claimant. He is —"

"Mr. George Parsons, the copper king," the scientist stated. "You didn't find the papers you sought because Willing had already taken them. That estate was what he wanted, and I daresay by some sort of legal jugglery he would have got it when all the claimants were out of the way; he didn't plan the murders until he was sure of it." The scientist spoke directly to Mrs. Davidson. "Since you lived with Miss Danbury you, of course, had a key to her apartment. Your only difficulty then was to enter the hotel late at night, unseen, and you took that chance. Willing took the same chance the night he killed Miss Danbury. Now, please tell us, how did you enter Sumner's room?"

"It was a terrible place, but I went

in, climbed the awful stairs and found the room; the newspapers had described the location precisely. The door was locked, as I knew it would be, but there was a fire escape at the end of the hallway. That is how I reached Sumner's window. I found it unlocked, and entered from the fire escape."

"I see." The Thinking Machine was silent for a moment; then he turned his petulant blue eyes on the prisoner. "You're a shrewd man, Willing. We know why you killed Miss Danbury and Henry Sumner — to eliminate claimants to the English estate. But Pittman? He must have learned that you were the murderer. When he tried to 'phone me, you heard him, killed him the same way, then bound and gagged yourself, and waited. A foolish ruse for a shrewd man, Willing — especially leaving one of Mrs. Davidson's handkerchiefs on the floor to throw suspicion on her. Absurd for a man with your knowledge of natural philosophy, Willing."

The Thinking Machine almost clucked with amusement.

"Of course," he continued, "I was aware that if you thought I knew too much about the murders you would come to me. You did. It was an obvious trap, but you fell into it. I was prepared for any attempt you might make to kill me. Curiously enough, I wasn't afraid of a knife or a gun. I knew the instrument of death you had been using was much too satisfactory for you to consider employing any other. And I was prepared for

that. I think that is all." He stood up.

"All?" Hatch and Mallory echoed the word. "We don't understand —"

"Oh!" And The Thinking Machine sat down again. "The way I reached my conclusions? Logic — just simple deductions from known facts. As simple as that two and two make four — not sometimes but all the time. Come back to the laboratory with me, both of you, and I'll explain."

In the laboratory The Thinking Machine turned to his work-table.

"Let me show you a simple experiment," he said, and he held aloft a thick glass vessel, closed at one end and with a stopcock at the other. "I place this heavy piece of rubber over the mouth of the tube and then turn the stopcock." He suited the action to the word. "Now take it off."

The reporter tugged at it with all his strength, then took a long breath and tried again. He was unable to move it. Detective Mallory also tried, and was equally unsuccessful. They looked at the scientist in perplexity.

"What holds it there?" asked Hatch.

"Vacuum," replied The Thinking Machine. "You may tear it to pieces, but no human power can pull it away whole." The little man with the yellow hair picked up a steel bodkin and thrust it through the rubber into the mouth of the tube. As he withdrew the bodkin there came a sharp, prolonged, hissing sound. A few seconds later the rubber fell off. "The vacuum was practically perfect — something

like one-millionth of an atmosphere. The pin hole permitted the air to fill the tube, the tremendous pressure against the rubber was removed, and —" The Thinking Machine waved his slender hands.

In that instant Mallory and Hatch comprehended. Hatch suddenly remembered some of his college experiments.

"If I should place that tube to your lips, Mr. Hatch — or to yours, Mr. Mallory — you would never speak again, never scream, never even struggle. It would jerk every particle of air out of your body, paralyze you. Within two minutes you would be dead. To remove the tube I should simply thrust the bodkin through your cheek — say, your left one — and withdraw

it. You see, now, the meth —"
"Absence of air in the lungs!" exclaimed Hatch.

"That's what the examining physician called it," said Mallory.

"You see," The Thinking Machine repeated peevishly, "there was no mystery in the manner of the three deaths. You knew what I have just shown you. The physicians knew it. But none of you knew that you knew it. Genius is the ability to apply knowledge, not the ability to acquire it."

The Thinking Machine glanced at his watch. "I'm late. I'm due now to make an address to the Society of Physical Research. If you will excuse me —"

He turned and left abruptly.

Our whodunit and howdunit were both written by men. It is perhaps significant that for a sample of the modern whydunit we chose not only the work of a woman but of a woman whose writing is not at all associated with the detective-crime field . . . Fannie Hurst, author of HUMORESQUE, LUMMOX, and BACK STREET, is a famous American novelist and short-story writer. Like so many successful writers, she began her literary career in her teens, working furiously on stories, essays, and verse. After spending her childhood and girlhood in St. Louis, she came to the big city (as she called it, The Vertical City), and after graduate study at Columbia, she "went into training for fiction" — by living in the New York slums, toiling in sweat shops, department stores, and on the stage, learning life as a nursemaid and a waitress, and even traveling to Europe by steerage. It was this background that infused her stories with warmth and vitality, with rich human interest and an enduring sympathy for the underdog. The critic Harry Salpeter has called Fannie Hurst "the sob sister of American fiction" — a clever phrase which does an injustice to Fannie Hurst's best work; for there is a depth in her best work that . . . well, read the story by

Fannie Hurst which we have chosen to represent the modern whydunit. This is no shallow probing of the whys and wherefors, no superficial once-over-lightly. The motivation is deep and ancient — and terribly frightening.

So, for the third corner of our 'tec triangle, open your heart and mind to the hereditary causes, the elemental and environmental causes . . .

GUILTY

by FANNIE HURST

TO THE swift hiss of rain down soot-greasy window panes and through a medley of the smells of steam off wet overcoats and a pale stench of fish, a judge turned rather tired Friday-afternoon eyes upon the prisoner at the bar, a smallish man in a decent-enough salt-and-pepper suit and more salt than pepper in his hair and mustache.

"You have heard the charge against you," intoned the judge in the holy and righteous key of justice about to be administered. "Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"I — I plead guilty of not having told her facts that would have helped her to struggle against the — the thing — her inheritance."

"You must answer the Court directly. Do you —"

"You see, Your Honor — my little girl — so little — my promise. Yes, yes, I — I plead guilty of keeping her in ignorance of what she should have known, but you see, Your Honor, my little gi —"

"Order! Answer to the point. Do you," began the judge again, "plead

guilty or not guilty?" his tongue chiming the repetition into the waiting silence like a clapper into a bell.

The prisoner at the bar thumbed his derby hat after the immemorial dry-fingered fashion of the hunted meek, his mouth like an open wound puckering to close.

"Guilty or not guilty, my man? Out with it."

Actually it was not more than a minute or two before the prisoner found reply, but it was long enough for his tortured eye to flash inward and backward with terrible focus. . . .

On its long cross-town block, Mrs. Plush's boarding house repeated itself no less than thirty-odd times. Every front hall of them smelled like cold boiled potato, and the gilt chair in the parlor like banana. At dinner hour thirty-odd basement dining rooms reverberated, not uncheerfully, to the ironstone clatter of the canary-bird bathtub of succotash, the three stewed prunes, or the redolent boiled potato, and on Saturday mornings, almost to the thirty-odd of them, wasp-

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waisted, oiled-haired young Negro girls in white-cotton stockings and cut-down high shoes enormously run down of heel; tilted pints of water over steep stone stoops and scratched at the trickle with old broom runts.

If Mrs. Plush's house broke rank at all, it did so by praiseworthy omission. In that row of the fly-by-night and the van-by-day, the moving or the express wagon seldom backed up before No. 28, except immediately preceding a wedding or following a funeral. And never, in twenty-two years of respectable tenancy, had the furtive lodger oozed, under darkness, through the Plush front door by night, or a huddle of sidewalk trunks and trappings staged the drab domestic tragedy of the dispossessed.

The Kellers (second-story back) had eaten their satisfied way through fourteen years of the breakfasts of apple sauce or cereal; choice of ham and eggs any style or country sausage and buckwheat cakes.

Jeanette Peopping, born in the back parlor, was married out of the front.

On the night that marked the seventeenth anniversary of the Dangs into the third-floor alcove room, there was frozen pudding with hot fudge sauce for dessert.

For the eight years of their placid connubiality Mr. and Mrs. Henry Jett had occupied the second-story front.

Stability, that was the word. Why, Mrs. Plush had dealt with her corner butcher for so long that on crowded

Saturday mornings it was her custom to step without challenge into the icy zone of the huge refrigerator; herself pinching and tearing back the cold-storage-bitten wings of fowls, weighing them with a fidelity to the ounce, except for a few extra giblets.

To the Jett Fish Company — *Steamers, Hotels, and Restaurants Supplied — If It Swims We Have It* — Mrs. Plush paid her bill quarterly only; then Mr. Jett deducting the sum delicately from his board.

On each of the three floors was a bathroom; spotlessly clean, with a neat hand-lettered sign over each tin tub: DO UNTO OTHERS AS YOU WOULD HAVE THEM DO UNTO YOU PLEASE WASH OUT THE TUB AFTER YOU

Upon the outstanding occasion of the fly in the soup and Mr. Keller's subsequent deathly illness, the regrettable immersion had been directly traceable, not to the kitchen, but to the dining-room ceiling. It was November, a season of heavy dipterous mortality. Besides, Mrs. Peopping had seen it fall.

Nor entered here the dirge of the soggy towel; Mrs. Plush placed fluffy stacks of them outside each door each morning. Nor groggy coffee; Mrs. Plush was famous for hers. Drip coffee, boiled up to an angry sea and half an eggshell dropped in like a fairy barque, to settle it.

The Jetts, with whom we have really to do, drank two cups apiece at breakfast. Mrs. Jett, to the slight aid and abetment of one of her two rolls,

stopped right there; Mr. Jett plunging on into choice-of —

The second roll Mrs. Jett usually carried away with her from the table. Along about ten o'clock she was apt to feel faint rather than hungry.

Not that there was a suggestion of frailty about Mrs. Jett. Anything but that. On the contrary, in all the eight years in the boarding house, she held the clean record of not a day in bed, and although her history previous to that time showed as many as fifteen hours a day on duty in the little fancy-goods store of her own proprietorship, those years showed her guilty of only two incapacitated days.

Yet there was something about Emma Jett — eight years of married life had not dissipated it — that was not eupeptic; something of the sear and yellow leaf of perpetual spinsterhood. She was a wintry little body whose wide marriage band always hung loosely on her finger with an air of not belonging; wore an invariable knitted shawl iced with beads across her round shoulders, and frizzed her graying bangs, which, although fruit of her scalp, had a set-on look.

She could look out tabbily from above a lap of handiwork, but in her boudoir wrapper of gray flannelette scalloped in black she was scrawny.

"I can no more imagine those two courting," Mrs. Keller, a proud twin herself and proud mother of twins, remarked one afternoon to a euchre group. "They must have sat company by correspondence. Why, they won't even kiss when he comes home if

there's anybody at all in the room!"

But in the end the consensus of opinion, unanimous to the vote, was: Lovely woman, Mrs. Jett. Nice couple; so unassuming. The goodness looks out of her face; and so reserved!

But it was this aura of reserve that kept Mrs. Jett, not without a bit of secret heartache about it, as remote from the little world about her as the yolk of an egg is remote from the white. Surrounded, yet no part of those surroundings.

Almost daily, in someone's room, over Honiton lace or the making of steel-bead chatelaine bags, then so much in vogue, those immediate, plushy-voiced gatherings of the members of the plain-gold circle took place.

The supreme *lèse majesté* of the married woman who wears her state of wedlock like a crown of blessed thorns; bleeds ecstatically and swaps afternoon-long intimacies, made nasty by the plush in her voice, with her sisters of the matrimonial dynasty.

Mrs. Jett was also bidden, by her divine right, to those conclaves of the wives, and faithfully she attended, but on the rim, as it were. Bitterly silent she sat to the swap of:

"That's nothing. After Jeanette was born my hair began to fall out just as if I had had typhoid"; or, "Both of mine, I am proud to say, were bottle babies"; and once, as she listened, her heart might have been a persimmon, puckering: "The idea for a woman of forty-five to have her first! It's not fair to the child."

They could not, of course, articulate it, but the fact of the matter was not alone that Mrs. Jett was childless (so was Mrs. Dang; who somehow belonged), it was that they sensed, with all the antennae of their busy little intuitions, the ascetic odor of spinsterhood which clung to Mrs. Jett. She was a little "too nice." Would flush at some of the innuendoes of the *contes intimes*, tales of no luster and dulled by soot, but in spite of an inner shrinkage would loop up her mouth to smile, because not to do so was to linger even more remotely outside the privileged rim of the wedding band.

Evenings, after these gatherings, Mrs. Jett was invariably even a bit gentler than her wont in her greetings to Mr. Jett.

Of course, they kissed upon his arrival home, comment to the contrary notwithstanding, in a taken-for-granted fashion, perhaps, but there was something sweet about their utter unexcitement; and had the afternoon session twisted her heart more than usual, Mrs. Jett was apt to place a second kiss lightly upon the black and ever so slightly white mustache, or lay her cheek momentarily to his, as if to atone by thus yearning over him for the one aching void between them.

But in the main Henry Jett was a contented and happy man.

His wife, whom he had met at a church social and wooed in the front of the embroidery and fancy-goods store, fitted him like the proverbial glove — a suede one. In the eight years since, his fish business had al-

most doubled, and his expenses, if anything, decreased, because more and more it became pleasanter to join in the evening game of no-stakes euchre down in the front parlor or to remain quietly upstairs, a gas lamp on the table between them, Mr. Jett in a dressing gown of hand-embroidered Persian design and a newspaper which he read from first to last; Mrs. Jett at her tranquil process of fine needlework.

Their room abounded in specimens of it. Centerpieces of rose design. Mounds of cushions stamped in bulldog's head and pipe and appropriately etched in colored floss. A poker hand, upheld by realistic five fingers embroidered to the life, and the cuff button denoted by a blue-glass jewel. Across their bed, making it a dais of incongruous splendor, was flung a great counterpane of embroidered linen, in design as narrative as a battle-surging tapestry.

He was exceedingly proud of her cunning with a needle, so fine that its stab through the cloth was too slight to be seen.

"It's like being able to create a book or a piece of music, Em, to say all that on a piece of cloth with nothing but a needle."

"It's a good thing I am able to create something, Henry," placing her thimble hand on his shoulder.

It was remarkable how quick and how tender his intuitions could be. An innuendo from her, faint as the brush of a wing, and he would immediately cluck with his tongue and

throw out quite a bravado of chest.

"You're all right, Em. You suit me."

"And you suit me, Henry," stroking his hand.

This he withdrew. It was apt to smell of fish and he thought that once or twice he had noticed her draw back from it, and, anyway, he was exceedingly delicate about the cling of the rottenly pungent fish odor of his workdays.

Not that he minded personally. He had long ago ceased to have any consciousness of the vapors that poured from the bins and the incoming catches into his little partitioned-off office. But occasionally he noticed that in street cars noses would begin to crinkle around him, and every once in a while, even in a crowded conveyance he would find himself the center of a little oasis of vacant seats.

Immediately upon his arrival home, although his hands seldom touched the fish, he would wash them in a solution of warm water and carbolic acid, and most of the time he changed his suit before dinner, from a salt-and-pepper to a pepper-and-salt, the only sartorial variety in which he ever indulged.

His wife was invariably touched by this little nicety of his; and sometimes bravely forced his hand to her cheek to prove her lack of repugnance.

Boarding-house lore had it correctly. They were an exceedingly nice couple, the Jetts.

One day in autumn, with the sky

the color and heaviness of a Lynn-haven oyster, Mrs. Jett sat quite unusually forward on her chair at one of the afternoon congresses of the wives, convened in Mrs. Peopping's back parlor, Jeanette Peopping, aged four, sweet and blonde, whom the Jetts loved to borrow Sunday mornings, while she was still in her little nightdress, playing paper dolls in the background.

Her embroidery hoop, with a large shaded pink rose in the working, had, contrary to her custom, fallen from idle hands, and instead of following the dart of the infinitesimal needle, Mrs. Jett's eyes were burningly upon Mrs. Peopping, following, with almost lip-reading intensity, that worthy lady's voluptuous mouthings.

She was a large, light person with protuberant blue eyes that looked as if at some time they had been two-thirds choked from their sockets and a characteristic of opening every sentence with her mouth shaped to an explosive O, which she filled with as much breath as it would hold.

It had been a long tale of obstetrical fact and fancy, told plushily, of course, against the dangerous little ears of Jeanette, and at its conclusion Mrs. Peopping's steel-bead bag, half finished, lay at her feet.

"—and for three days six doctors gave me up. Why, I didn't see Jeanette until the fourteenth day, when most women are up and out. The crisis, you know. My night nurse, an awful sweet girl — I send her a Christmas present to this day — said if I had

been six years younger it wouldn't have gone so hard with me. I always say if the men knew what we women go through — Maybe if some of them had to endure the real pain themselves they would have something to do besides walk up and down the hall and turn pale at the smell of ether coming through the keyhole. Ah me! I've been a great sufferer in my day."

It was then that Mrs. Jett sat forward on the edge of the straight chair, and put her question.

There was a pause after it, as if an intruder had poked her head in through the door, and it brought only the most negligible answer from Mrs. Peopping.

"Forty-three."

Almost immediately Mrs. Dang caught at the pause for a case in point that had been trembling on her lips all during Mrs. Peopping's recital.

"A doctor once told a second cousin of my sister-in-law's —" and so on *ad infinitum*, *ad lib.*, and *ad nauseum*.

That night Mrs. Jett did an unprecedented thing. She crept into the crevice of her husband's arm from behind as he stood in his waistcoat, washing his hands in the carbolic solution at the bowl and washstand. He turned, surprised, unconsciously placing himself between her and the reeky water.

"Henry," she said, rubbing up against the alpaca back to his vest.

"In a minute, Em," he said, rather puzzled and wishing she would wait.

"Hen-ery, I haven't words sweet enough to tell you."

"Em, tell what?" And stopped. He could see suddenly that her eyes were full of new pins of light and his lightning intuition performed a miracle of understanding.

"Emmy!" he cried, jerking her so that her breath jumped, and at the sudden drench of tears down her face sat her down, supporting her roundish back with his wet hands.

"I — can't say — what I feel, Henry — only — God is good and — I'm not afraid."

He held her to his shoulder and let her tears rain down into his watch pocket.

"God is good, Henry, isn't He?"

"Yes, Emmy, yes. Oh, my Emmy!"

"It must have been our prayers."

"Well," sheepishly, "not exactly mine, Emmy; you're the saint of this family. But I — I've wished."

"Henry. I'm so happy — Mrs. Peopping had Jeanette at forty-three. Three years older than me. I'm not afraid."

It was then that he looked down at her graying head there, prone against his chest, and a dart of fear smote him.

"Emmy," he cried, dragging her tear-happy face up to his, "if you're afraid — not for anything in the world! You're *first*, Em."

"Afraid? That's the beautiful part, Henry. I'm not. Only happy. Why afraid, Henry — if others dare it at — forty-three — You mean because it was her second?"

"You — We — Well, we're not spring chickens any more, Em. If you are sure it's not too —"

She hugged him, laughing her tears.

"I'm all right, Henry — we've been too happy not to — to — perpetuate — it."

This time he did not answer. His cheek was against the crochet of her yoke and she could hear his sobs with her heart.

Miraculously, like an amoeba reaching out to enclose unto itself, the circle opened with a gasp of astonishment that filled Mrs. Peopping's O to its final stretch and took unto its innermost Emma Jett.

Nor did she wear her initiation lightly. There was a new tint out in her long cheeks, and now her chair; a rocker, was but one removed from Mrs. Peopping's.

Oh, the long, sweet afternoons over garments that made needlework sublime. No longer the padded rose on the centerpiece or the futile doily, but absurd little dresses with sleeves that she measured to the length of her hand, and yokes cut out to the pattern of a playing card, and all fretted over with feather-stitching that was frailer than maidenhair fern and must have cost many an eyeache, which, because of its source, was easy to bear.

And there happened to Mrs. Jett that queer juvenescence that sometimes comes to men and women in middle life. She who had enjoyed no particular youth (her father had died in a ferryboat crash two weeks before her birth, and her mother three years after) came suddenly to acquire come-

liness which her youth had never boasted.

The round-shouldered, long-cheeked girl had matured gingerly to rather sparse womanhood that now at forty relented back to a fulsome thirty.

Perhaps it was the tint of light out in her face, perhaps the splendor of the vision; but at any rate, in those precious months to come, Mrs. Jett came to look herself as she should have looked ten years back.

They were timid and really very beautiful together, she and Henry Jett. He came to regard her as a vase of porcelain, and, in his ignorance, regarded the doctor's mandates harsh; would not permit her to walk, but ordered a cab every day from three to four, Mrs. Jett alternating punctiliously with each of the boarding-house ladies for driving companion.

Every noon, for her delectation at luncheon, he sent a boy from the store with a carton of her special favorites — Blue Point oysters. She suddenly liked them small because, as she put it, they went down easier.

Long evenings they spent at names, exercising their pre-determination as to sex. "Ann" was her choice, and he was all for canceling his preference for "Elizabeth," until one morning she awakened to the white light of inspiration.

"I have it! Why not Ann Elizabeth?"

"Great!"

They talked of housekeeping, reluctantly, it is true, because Mrs. Plush herself was fitting up, of hard-to-spare

evenings, a bassinette of pink and white. They even talked of schools.

Then came the inevitable time when Mrs. Jett lost interest. Quite out of a clear sky even the Blue Points were taboo, and instead of joining this or that card or sewing circle, there were long afternoons of stitching away alone, sometimes the smile out on her face, sometimes not.

"Em, is it all right with you?" Henry asked her once or twice.

"Of course it is! If I weren't this way — now — it wouldn't be natural. You don't understand."

He didn't, so could only be vaguely and futilely sorry.

Then one day something quite horrible, in a small way, happened to Mrs. Jett. Sitting sewing, suddenly it seemed to her that through the very fluid of her eyeballs, as it were, floated a school of fish. Small ones — young smelts, perhaps — with oval lips, fillips to their tails, and sides that glistened.

She laid down her bit of linen lawn, fingers to her lids as if to squeeze out their tiredness. She was trembling from the unpleasantness, and for a frightened moment could not swallow. Then she rose, shook out her skirts, and to be rid of the moment carried her sewing up to Mrs. Dang's, where a euchre game was in session; and by a few adroit questions in between deals gained the reassurance that a nervous state in her "condition" was highly normal.

She felt easier, but there was the same horrid recurrence three times that week. Once during an evening of

lotto down in the front parlor she pushed back from the table suddenly, hand flashing up to her throat.

"Em!" said Mr. Jett.

"It's nothing," she faltered.

"She's all right," said Mrs. Peopling, omnisciently. "Those things pass."

Going upstairs that evening, alone in the hallway, they flung an arm each across the other's shoulder, crowding playfully up the narrow flight.

"Emmy," he said, "poor Em, everything will be all right."

She restrained an impulse to cry. "Poor nothing," she said.

But neither the next evening, which was Friday, nor for Fridays thereafter, would she venture down for fish dinner, dining cozily up in her room off milk toast and a fluffy meringue dessert.

Henry puzzled a bit over the Fridays. It was his heaviest day at the business, and it was upsetting to come home tired and feel her place beside him at the dinner table vacant.

But the women's nods were more knowing than ever, the reassuring insinuations more and more delicate.

But one night, out of one of those stilly cisterns of darkness that between two and four are deepest with sleep, Henry was awakened on the crest of such a blow and yell that he swam up to consciousness in a ready-made armor of high-napped gooseflesh.

A regrettable thing had happened. Awakened, too, on the high tide of what must have been a disturbing dream, Mrs. Jett flung out her arm

as if to ward off something. That arm encountered Henry, snoring lightly at her side. But, unfortunately, to that frightened fling of her arm Henry did not translate himself to her as Henry.

That was a fish lying there beside her! A man-sized fish with its mouth jerked open to the shape of a gasp and the fillip still through its enormous body, as if its flanks were uncomfortably dry. A fish!

With a shriek that tore a jagged rent through the darkness, Mrs. Jett began pounding at the slippery flanks, her hands sliding off its shininess.

"Out! Out! Henry, where are you? Help me! Oh God, don't let him get me. Take him away, Henry! Where are you? My hands — slippery! Where are you —"

Stunned, feeling for her in the darkness, he wanted to take her shuddering form into his arms and waken her out of this horror, but with each groping move of his her hurtling shrieks came faster, and finally, dragging the bedclothing with her, she was down on the floor at the bedside, blobbering.

He found a light, and by this time there were already other lights flashing up in the startled household. When he saw her there on the floor beside the bed, a cold sweat broke out over him.

"Why, Emmy — Emmy —"

She saw him now and knew him, and tried in her poor and already burning way to force her chattering jaws together.

"Hen-ery — dream — bad — fish — Hen-ery —"

He drew her up to the side of the bed, covering her shivering knees as she sat there, and throwing a blanket across her shoulders. Fortunately he was aware that the soothing note in his voice helped, and so he sat down beside her, stroking her hand, stroking, as if to hypnotize her into quiet.

"Henry," she said, closing her fingers into his wrists, "I must have dreamed — a horrible dream. Get back to bed, dear. I — I don't know what ails me, waking up like that. That — fish! Oh God! Henry, hold me, hold me."

He did, lulling her with a thousand repetitions of his limited store of endearments, and he could feel the jerk of sobs in her breathing subside and she seemed almost to doze.

Then came knocks at the door, and hurried explanations through the slit that he opened, and Mrs. Peopping's eye close to the crack.

"Everything is all right. . . . Just a little bad dream the missus had. . . . All right now. . . . To be expected, of course. . . . No, nothing anyone can do. . . . Good night. Sorry. . . . No, thank you. Everything is all right."

The remainder of the night the Jetts kept a small light burning, after a while Henry dropping off into exhausted and heavy sleep. For hours Mrs. Jett lay staring at the small bud of light, no larger than a human eye. It seemed to stare back at her, warning, Now don't you go dropping off to sleep and misbehave again.

And holding herself tense against

a growing drowsiness, she didn't — for fear —

The morning broke clear, and for Mrs. Jett full of small reassurances. It was good to hear the clatter of milk deliveries, and the first bar of sunshine came in through the hand-embroidered window curtains like a smile, and she could smile back. Later she ventured down shamefacedly for the two cups of coffee, which she drank bravely, facing the inevitable pot-pourri of comment.

"That was a fine scare you gave us last night, Mrs. Jett."

"I woke up stiff with fright. Didn't I, Will? Gracious! That first yell was a curdler!"

"Just before Jeanette was born I used to have bad dreams, too, but nothing like that. My!"

"My mother had a friend whose sister-in-law walked in her sleep right out of a third-story window and was dashed to —"

"Shh-h-h!"

"It's natural, Mrs. Jett. Don't you worry."

She really tried not to, and after some subsequent and private reassurance from Mrs. Peopping and Mrs. Keller, went for her ride in the Park, Mrs. Plush sitting erect beside her.

One day, in the presence of Mrs. Peopping, Mrs. Jett jumped to her feet with a violent shaking of her right hand, as if to dash off something that had crawled across its back.

"Ugh!" she cried. "It flopped right on my hand. A minnow! Ugh!"

"A what?" cried Mrs. Peopping, jumping to her feet.

"A minnow. I mean a bug — a June bug. It was a bug."

There ensued a mock search for the thing, the two women, on all-fours, peering beneath the chairs. In that position they met levelly, eye to eye. Then without more ado rose, brushing their knees and reseating themselves.

"Maybe if you would read books you would feel better," said Mrs. Peopping, scooping up a needleful of steel beads. "I know a woman who made it her business to read all the poetry books she could lay hands on, and went to all the bandstand concerts in the Park the whole time, and now her daughter sings in the choir out in Saginaw, Michigan."

"I know some believe in that," said Mrs. Jett, trying to force a smile through her pallor. "I must try it."

But the infinitesimal stitching kept her so busy.

It was inevitable, though, that in time Henry should begin to shoulder more than a normal share of unease.

One evening she leaned across the little lamplit table between them as he sat reading in the Persian-design dressing gown and said, as rapidly as her lips could form the dreadful repetition, "The fish, the fish, the fish." And then, almost impudently for her, disclaimed having said it.

He urged her to visit her doctor and she would not, and so, secretly, he did, and came away better satisfied, and with directions for keeping her

diverted, which punctiliously he tried to observe.

He began by committing sly acts of discretion on his own accord. Was careful not to handle the fish. Changed his suit now before coming home, behind a screen in his office, and, feeling foolish, went out and purchased a bottle of violet eau de Cologne, which he rubbed into his palms and for some inexplicable reason on his half-bald spot.

Of course that was futile, because the indescribably and faintly rotten smell of the sea still came through.

One Sunday morning, Mr. Jett climbed into his dressing gown and padded downstairs for the loan of little Jeanette Peopping, with whom he returned, the delicious nub of her goldilocks head showing just above the blanket which enveloped her.

He deposited her in bed beside Mrs. Jett, the little pink feet peeping out from her nightdress and her baby teeth showing in a smile that Mr. Jett loved to pinch together.

"Cover her up quick, Em."

Quite without precedent, Jeanette puckered up to cry, holding herself rigidly to Mr. Jett's dressing gown.

"Why, Jeanette baby, don't you want to go to Auntie Em?"

"No! No! No!"

"Baby, you'll take cold. Come under covers with Auntie Em?"

"No! No! No! Take me back."

"Oh, Jeanette, that isn't nice! What ails the child? She's always so eager to come to me. Shame on Jeanette! Come, baby, to Auntie Em?"

"No! No! No! My mamma says you're crazy. Take me back."

For a frozen moment Henry regarded his wife above the glittering fluff of little-girl curls. It seemed to him he could almost see her face become smaller.

"Naughty little Jeanette," he said, shouldering her and carrying her down the stairs; "naughty little girl."

When he returned his wife was sitting locked in the attitude in which he had left her.

"Henry!" she whispered, reaching out and closing her hand over his so that the nails bit in. "Not that, Henry! Tell me not that!"

"Why, Em," he said, sitting down and trembling, "I'm surprised at you, listening to baby talk!"

She leaned over, shaking him by the shoulder.

"I know. They're saying it about me. I'm not that, Henry. I swear I'm not that! Always protect me against their saying that, Henry. Not crazy — not that! It's natural for me to feel queer at times — now. Every woman in this house who says — that — about me has had her nervous feelings. It's not quite so easy for me, as if I were a bit younger. That's all. The doctor said that. But nothing to worry about. Mrs. Peopping had Jeanette — Oh, Henry promise me you'll always protect me against their saying that! I'm not that — I swear to you, Henry — not that!"

"I know you're not, Emmy. It's too ridiculous to talk about. Pshaw!"

"And you'll always protect me

against anyone saying it? They'll believe you, Henry, not me. Promise to protect me against our little Ann Elizabeth ever thinking that of — of her mother."

"Why, Emmy!" he said. "Why, Emmy! I just promise a thousand times —" and could not go on.

But through her hot gaze of tears she saw and understood and, satisfied, rubbed her cheek against his arm.

The rest is cataclysmic.

Returning home one evening in a nice glow from a January out-of-doors, his mustache glistening with little frozen drops and his hands (he never wore gloves) unbending of cold, Mrs. Jett rose at her husband's entrance.

"Well, well!" he said, exhaling heartily, the scent of violet denying the pungency of fish. "How's the busy bee this evening?"

For answer Mrs. Jett met him with the crescendo yell of a gale.

"Ya-a-ah! Keep out — you! Fish! Fish!" she cried, springing toward him; and in the struggle that ensued the tubing wrenched off the gas-lamp and plunged them into darkness. "Fish! I'll fix you! Ya-a-ah!"

"Emmy! For God's sake, it's Henry!"

"Ya-a-ah! I'll fix you! Fish! Fish!"

Two days later Ann Elizabeth was born, beautiful, but premature by two weeks.

Emma Jett died holding her tight against her newly rich breasts, for a few of the most precious and most fleeting moments of her life.

All her absurd fears washed away, her free hand could lie without spasm in Henry's, and it was as if she found in her last words a secret euphony that delighted her.

"Ann-Elizabeth. Sweet-beautiful. Ann-Elizabeth. Sweet-beautiful."

Later in his bewildered and almost ludicrous widowerhood, tears would sometimes galumph down on his daughter's face as Henry rocked her of evenings and Sunday mornings.

"Sweet-beautiful," came so absurdly from under his swiftly graying mustache, but often, when sure he was quite alone, he would say it over and over again.

"Sweet-beautiful. Ann-Elizabeth. Sweet-beautiful. Ann-Elizabeth."

Of course the years puttied in and healed and softened, until for Henry almost a Turner haze hung between him and some of the stark facts of Emma Jett's death, turping out horror, which is always the first to fade from memory, and leaving a dear sepia outline of the woman who had been his.

At seventeen, Ann Elizabeth was the sun, the sky, the west wind, and the shimmer of spring — all gone into the making of her a rosebud off the stock of his being.

His way of putting it was, "You're my all, Annie, closer to me than I am to myself."

She hated the vowelings of her name, and because she was so nimble with youth could dance away from these moods of his rather than plumb them.

"I won't be 'Annie.' Please, daddy, I'm your Ann Elizabeth."

"Ann Elizabeth, then. My Ann Elizabeth,"—an inner rhythm in him echoing: Sweet-Beautiful. Sweet-Beautiful.

There was actually something of the lark about her. She awoke with a song, sometimes kneeling up in bed, with her pretty brown hair tousling down over her shoulders and chirruping softly to herself into the little bird's-eye-maple dressing-table mirror, before she flung her feet over the side of the bed.

And then, innate little housekeeper that she was, it was to the preparing of breakfast with a song, her early morning full of antics. Tiptoeing in to awaken her father to the tickle of a broom straw. Spreading his breakfast piping hot, and then concealing herself behind a screen, that he might marvel at the magic of it. And once she put salt in his coffee, a fresh cup concealed behind the toast rack, and knee to knee they rocked in merriment at his grimace.

She loved thus to tease him, probably because he was so stolid that each new adventure came to him with something of a shock. He was forever being taken unawares, as if he could never become entirely accustomed to the wonder of her, and that delighted her. Even the obviousness of his slippers stuffed out with carrots could catch him napping. To her dance of glee behind him he kept poking and poking to get into them, only the peck of her kiss upon his neck finally

initiating him into the absurdity.

There was a little apartment of five rooms, twenty minutes removed by subway from the fish store; her bedroom, all pink and yellow maple; his; a kitchen, parlor, and dining room worked out happily in white-muslin curtains, spindle-legged parlor chairs, Henry's newfangled chifferobe and bed with a fine depth of mattress, and a kitchen with eight shining pots above the sink.

It was two and a half years since Mrs. Plush had died, and the boarders, as if spilled from an ark on rough seas, had struck out for diverse shores. The marvel to them now was that they had delayed so long.

"A home of our own, Ann. Pretty sweet, isn't it?"

"Oh, daddy, it is!"

"You mustn't overdo, though, Baby. Sometimes we're not so strong as we think we are. A little hired girl would be best."

"But I love doing it alone, dad. It — it's the next best thing to a home of — my own."

He looked startled into her dreaming eyes.

"Your own? Why, Annie, isn't this — your own?"

She laid fingers against his eyes so that he could not see her.

"You know what I mean, daddy — my — very — own."

At that timid phrasing of hers Henry felt that his heart was actually strangling.

"Why, Annie," he said, "I never thought —"

But of course it had happened.

The young man's name was Willis — Fred E. Willis — already credit man in a large wholesale grocery firm and two feet well on the road to advancement. A square-faced, clean-faced fellow, with a clean love of life and of Ann Elizabeth in his heart.

Henry liked him.

Ann Elizabeth loved him.

And yet, what must have been a long-smoldering flame of fear shot up through the very core of Henry's being.

"Why, Ann Elizabeth," he kept repeating, in his slow and always inarticulate manner, "I — You — Mine — I just never thought."

"I know, daddy-darlums," and I'll never leave you. Never. Fred has promised we will always be together. We'll live right here with you."

"Annie," he cried, "you mustn't ever — marry. I mean, leave daddy — that way — anyway. You hear me? You're daddy's own. Just his by himself. Nobody is good enough for my girl."

"But, daddy," clouding up for tears, "I thought you liked Fred!"

"I do, but it's you I'm talking about. Nobody can have you."

"But I love him, daddy!"

"Oh, Ann, Ann! Daddy hasn't done right, perhaps, but he meant well. There are *reasons* why he wants to keep his little girl with him always."

"But, daddy dear, I promise you we'll never let you be lonely. Why, I couldn't stand leaving you any more than you could —"

"Not those reasons alone, Ann."

"Then what?"

"You're so young," he tried to procrastinate.

"I'll be eighteen. A woman."

"You're — so — Oh, I don't know — I —"

"You haven't any reasons, dad, except dear silly ones. You can't keep me a little girl all the time, dear. I love Fred. It's all planned. Don't ruin my life, daddy — don't ruin my life."

She was lovely in her tears and surprisingly resolute in her mind, and he was more helpless than ever with her.

"Ann — you're not strong."

"Strong!" she cried, flinging back her curls and out her chest. "That is a fine excuse. I'm stronger than most. All youngsters have measles and scarlet fever and Fred says his sister Lucile out in Des Moines had St. Vitus' dance when she was eleven, just like I did. I'm stronger than you are, dad."

"You're nervous, Annie. That's why I want always to keep you at home — quiet — with me."

She sat back, her pretty eyes troubled-up lakes.

"You mean the dreams and the scared feeling, once in a while, that I can't swallow. That's nothing. I know now why I was so frightened in my sleep the other night. I told Fred, and he said it was the peach sundae on top of the crazy old movie we saw that evening. Why, Jeanette Peopping had to take a rest cure the year before she was married. Girls are always more nervous than fellows. Daddy — you — you frighten me when you look at

me like that! I don't know what you mean! What-do-you-mean?"

He was helpless and at bay and took her in his arms and kissed her.

"I guess your old daddy is a jealous pig and can't bear to share his girl with anyone. Can't bear to — to give her up."

"You won't be giving up, daddums. I couldn't stand that, either. It will be three of us then. You'll see. Look up and smile at your Ann Elizabeth."

And of course he did.

It was typical of her that she should be the busiest of brides-to-be, her complete little trousseau, every piece down to the dishcloths, monogrammed by her — A. E. W.

Skillful with her needle and thrifty in her purchases, the outfit when completed might have represented twice the outlay that Henry expended on it. Then there were "showers" — linen, stocking, and even a tin one; gifts from her girl friends — cup, face, bath, and guest towels; all the tremendous trifles and addenda that go to gladden the chattel-loving heart of a woman. A little secret society of her erstwhile school friends presented her with a luncheon set; the Keller twins with a silver gravy boat; and Jeanette Peopping Gruman, who occupied an apartment in the same building, spent as many as three afternoons a week with her, helping to piece out a really lovely tulip-design quilt.

"Jeanette," said Ann Elizabeth one afternoon, "how did you feel that time when you had the nerv — the breakdown?"

Jeanette, pretty after a high-cheek-boned fashion and her still bright hair worn coronet fashion about her head, bit off a thread with sharp white teeth, only too eager to reminisce her ills.

"I was just about gone, that's what I was. Let anybody so much as look at me twice and, pop! I'd want to cry about it."

"And?"

"For six weeks I didn't even have enough interest to ask after Gruman, who was courting me then. Oh, it was no fun, I can tell you, that nervous breakdown of mine!"

"Did it — was it — was it ever hard to swallow, Jeanette?"

"To swallow?"

"Yes. I mean — did you ever dream or — think — or feel so frightened you couldn't swallow?"

"I felt lots of ways, but that wasn't one of them. Swallow! Who ever heard of not swallowing?"

"But didn't you ever dream, Jeanette — terrible things — such terrible things — and get to thinking and couldn't stop yourself? Silly, ghostly — things."

Jeanette put down her sewing.

"Ann, are you quizzing me about — your mother?"

"My mother? Why my mother? Jeanette, what do you mean? Why do you ask me a thing like that? What has my mother got to do with it?"

Conscious that she had erred, Jeanette veered carefully back.

"Why, nothing, only I remember mamma telling me when I was just a

kiddie how your mamma used to — to imagine all sorts of things just to pass the time away while she embroidered the loveliest pieces. You're like her, mamma used to say — a handy little body. Poor mamma, to think she had to be taken before Gruman, junior, was born! Ah me!"

That evening, before Fred came for his two hours with her in the little parlor, Ann flew in from a ring at the doorbell with a good-sized special-delivery box from a silversmith, untying it with eager, fumbling fingers, her father laying aside his newspaper to venture three guesses as to its contents.

"Another one of those syrup pitchers."

"Oh dear!" — plucking the twine — "I hope not!"

"Some more nut picks."

"Daddy, stop calamity howling. Here's the card. Des Moines, Iowa. *From Lucile Willis, with love to her new sister.* Isn't that the sweetest! It's something with a pearl handle."

"I know. Another one of those pie-spade things."

"Wrong! Wrong! It's two pieces. Oh!"

It was a fish set of silver and mother-of-pearl. A large-bowled spoon and a sort of Neptune's fork, set up in a white-sateen bed.

"Say now, that *is* neat," said Henry, appraising each piece with a show of critical appreciation not really his. All this spread of the gewgaws of approaching nuptials seemed meaningless to him; bored him. Butter knives.

Berry spoons. An embarrassment of nut picks and silver pitchers. A sliver of silver paper cutter with a hilt and a dog's-head handle. And now, for Fred's delectation this evening, the newly added fish set.

Tilting it against the lamp in the place of honor, Ann Elizabeth turned away suddenly, looking up at her father in a sudden dumb panic of which he knew nothing, her two hands at her fair, bare throat. It was so hard again to swallow. Impossible.

But finally, as was always the case, she did swallow, with a great surge of relief. A little later, seated on her father's knee and plucking at his tie in a futile fashion that he loved, she asked him:

"Daddy — about mother —"

They seldom talked of her, but always during these rare moments a beautiful mood shaped itself between them. It was as if the mere breath of his daughter's sweetly lipped use of "mother" swayed the bitter-sweet memory of the woman he carried so faithfully in the cradle of his heart.

"Yes, baby — about mother?"

"Daddy" — still fingering at the tie — "was mother — was everything all right with her up — to the very — end? I mean — no nerv — no pain? Just all of a sudden the end — quietly. Or have you told me that just to — spare me?"

She could feel him stiffen, but when his voice came it was even.

"Why, Ann, what a — question! Haven't I told you so often how mother just peacefully passed on?"

"I know, daddy, but before—wasn't there any nerv—any sickness?"

"No," he said, rather harshly for him. "No. No. What put such ideas into your head?"

You see, he was shielding Emma way back there, and a typhoon of her words was raging through his head: *Oh, Henry, protect me against anyone ever saying—that. Promise me.*

And now, with no sense of his terrible ruthlessness, he was protecting her with her own daughter.

"Then, daddy, just one more thing," and her underlip caught while she waited for answer. "There is no other reason except your own dear silly one of loneliness—why you keep wanting me to put off my marriage?"

"No, baby," he said, finally, his words with no more depth than if his body were a hollow gourd.

Immediately, and with all the resilience of youth, she was her happy self again, kissing him through his mustache and on his now frankly bald head, which gave off the incongruous odor of violet eau de Cologne.

"Old dude daddy!" she cried, and wanted to kiss his hands, which he held suddenly very far from her reach.

Then the bell rang again and Fred Willis arrived. All the evening, long after Henry lay on his deep-mattressed bed, staring, the little apartment trilled to her laughter and the basso of Fred's.

A few weeks later there occurred a strike of the delivery men and truck

drivers of the city, and Henry, especially hard hit because of the perishable nature of his product, worked early and late, oftentimes loading the wagons himself.

Frequently he was as much as an hour or two late to dinner, and upon one or two occasions had tiptoed out of the house before the usual hour when Ann opened her eyes.

They were trying days, the scheme of his universe broken into, and Henry thrived on routine.

The third week of the strike there were street riots, some of them directly in front of the fish store, and Henry came home after a day of the unaccustomed labor of loading and unloading hampers of fish, really quite shaken.

When he arrived Ann Elizabeth was cutting around the scalloped edge of a doily with embroidery scissors, the litter of cut glass and silver things out on the table and throwing up quite a brilliance under the electric lamp, and from the kitchen the slow sizzle of waiting chops.

"Whew!" he said, as he entered, both from the whiff he emanated as he shook out of his overcoat, and from a great sense of his weariness.

Ann Elizabeth started violently, first at the whiff which preceded him and at his approach into the room; then sat forward, her hand closing into the arm of the chair, body thrust forward.

Then she rose slowly and slyly, and edged behind the table, her two hands up about her throat.

"Don't you come in here," she said, lowly and evenly: "I know you, but I'm not afraid. I'm only afraid of you at night, but not by light. You let me swallow, you hear! Get out! Get out!"

Rooted, Henry stood.

"Why, Annie!" he said in the soothing voice from out of his long ago.

"No, you don't," she cried, springing back as he took the step forward. "My daddy'll kill you if he finds you here. He'll slit you up from your tail right up to your gill. He knows how. I'm going to tell him and Fred on you. You won't let me swallow. You're slippery. I can't stand it. Don't you come near me! Don't!"

"Annie!" he cried. "Good God! Annie, it's daddy who loves you!" Poor Henry — her voice was still under a whisper and in his agony he committed the error of rushing at her. "Annie, it's daddy!"

But she was too quick. Her head thrown back so that the neck muscles strained out like an outraged deer's cornered in the hunt and her eyes rolled up, Ann felt for and grasped the paper knife off the trinket-littered table.

"Don't you touch me — slit you up from tail to your gills."

"Annie, it's daddy! Papa! For God's sake look at daddy — Ann! God!" And caught her wrist in the very act of its plumb-line rush for his heart.

He was sweating in his struggle with her, and most of all her strength appalled him — she was so little for her terrible unaccountable power.

"Don't touch me! You can't! You haven't any arms! Horrible gills!"

She was talking as she struggled, still under the hoarse and frantic whisper, but her breath coming in long soughs. "Slit-you-up-from-tail. Slit — you — up — from — tail — to — gills."

"Annie! Annie!" still obsessed by his anguished desire to reassure her with the normality of his touch. "See, Annie, it's daddy. Ann Elizabeth's daddy." With a flash her arm and the glint of the paper cutter eluded him again and again, but finally he caught her by the waist, struggling, in his dreadful mistake, to calm her down into the chair again.

"Now. I've got you, darling. Now — sit — down —"

"No, you haven't," she said, a sort of wild joy coming out in her whisper, and cunningly twisting the upper half of her body back from his, the hand still held high. "You'll never get me — you fish!"

And plunged with her high hand in a straight line down into her throat.

It was only when the coroner withdrew the sliver of paper knife from its whiteness, that, coagulated, the dead and waiting blood began to ooze.

"Do you," intoned the judge for the third and slightly more impatient time, "plead guilty or not guilty to the charge of murder?"

This time the lips of the prisoner's wound of a mouth moved stiffly together:

"Guilty."

Oscar Schisgall, one of the most popular contributors to present-day "slick" magazines, sold his first story in 1921 — to Street & Smith's Detective Story Magazine, which launched so many writing reputations in its time. In the next five years Mr. Schisgall achieved considerable success in the "pulp" field — to the extent that his name on the cover of a magazine had an accelerating effect on that periodical's newsstand sales. That is how it came about that Oscar Schisgall experimented with a new form — new to him in that period of his career.

In 1926, by accident or error, the magazine called *Clues* printed a cover with Oscar's name on it, and then to the horror of its editorial staff discovered that it had no story to go with the cover! Ensued a frantic S.O.S. in which the editor pleaded with Oscar to Save Our Slip. Faced with the task of writing a story overnight, Oscar decided to do a very short short-story, and in the early morning hours Oscar made a discovery: he liked the new form. He liked its terseness; he liked the challenge which a story of only 1500 words imposes — 1500 words, and yet have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

So, as time went on, Oscar always found opportunity to continue his original short-short experiment. What had started as a literary crisis developed into a literary habit. Since that first short-short in 1926 Oscar Schisgall has written more than 400 tiny tales — yes, more than 400! We doubt if any contemporary writer has produced as many, with the possible exception of Octavus Roy Cohen. Mr. Schisgall's short-short stories have appeared in all the leading magazines — *Collier's*, *American*, *This Week*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Liberty*, to name only a few — and even in a few magazines which had never published short-shorts before — like *Reader's Digest* and *Coronet*.

Now, we bring you one of Oscar Schisgall's finest efforts in this tight 'tec technique. Indeed, we nominate Mr. Schisgall's "The Suspect" as the best detective-crime short-short story published during 1948.

THE SUSPECT

by OSCAR SCHISGALL

IN SPITE of the perplexity he caused me through the years, I give you my word I always liked Gene Russey. Summer after summer I went back to that fishing camp of his on upper Moosehead — a rather elaborate place, as fishing camps go, with six private cottages grouped around the big main

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hall. And whenever I arrived, his boyish grin of welcome, his hearty handshake, increased my affection for him. He was short, almost chubby, with sandy hair and a snub-nosed face. His bright blue eyes were as ingenuous as a child's.

Still, a man likes to know things about his friends. What baffled me was my failure to learn anything of his background.

"Gene," I asked during the first summer, "how long have you been up here?"

"Couple of years," he said.

"Where you from originally?"

We were paddling toward a pickerel cove, and I was in the prow of the canoe, so that I couldn't see his face. Yet I felt a hesitation that almost made me turn. Then he said, "Bardentown. Little place in upper New York. You never heard of it."

"Lots of nice little towns up in New York State I never heard of, I guess. . . . What made you come up here?"

"It's a long story," Gene Russey said. His tone cut off all discussion, indicating he didn't want to say more.

But he left me wondering. Here he was, living alone in the Maine woods, unmarried, without any visible family connections. Not once, indeed, in all the years I knew him did he mention his family.

He talked freely enough about other matters — about fishing, hunting, the beauty of Maine winters. And whenever he read a magazine story of mine he particularly liked, he took the trouble to write a long, compli-

mentary letter. But about himself there was never a word.

Having been silenced once, however, I never again attempted to pry into his life. I think he appreciated that. Maybe that was why he eventually did tell me about the thing that had happened in Bardentown. It was, I suppose, his way of showing his trust in me.

We had paddled across the lake to camp for the night in a cove of silver birches. It was one of those evenings I love, very quiet and black, without a moon. After an hour of impersonal talk we were silent, and I looked at him curiously across embers that reddened his round face. Maybe he guessed what was in my mind.

"You do a lot of wondering about me, don't you?" he said.

"I'm afraid I do, Gene."

"Well," he said slowly, puffing at his pipe, "I've always been afraid that if I told people about myself I'd lose some friendships I value — like yours."

Though I was startled, I decided to take the thing with a chuckle. "Are you going to tell me you're an escaped murderer?"

"No. I've never done anything criminal, anything dishonest, in my life. That's the whole point. And yet —" He gazed at the fire. "Last week there was a senator who claimed that public opinion has killed more people than firing squads. He was right."

He smoked quietly for a while. Then he went on, "Before the thing hit me, I used to be a pretty happy guy in Bardentown. Never had much

money, but I had a nice job teaching at the high school. Had a girl, too—we were going to be married in the spring. It seemed to me most people liked me pretty well. Trusted me. Fact is, I could have sworn I had a *lot* of friends." He laughed at that, with so much bitterness that I looked at him in astonishment.

"Real friends," I said, "aren't so easily lost."

"That's what I used to think. But Bardentown gave me a wonderful lesson in human psychology. One day I found a woman's purse—a black handbag lying alongside the road. There was a little velvet bag in it, and the bag was filled with jewels—a necklace, bracelets, rings, brooches. I decided some woman must have lost it on her way to her safety deposit box—something like that. There was no identification at all in the purse. No wallet, no cards. Just the bag of jewels.

"Being an honest man," he went on a bit derisively, "I hurried home and telephoned the police about it. Within half an hour they called back to say an excited woman, a Mrs. Wrencher, had just reported the loss. They were bringing her right over." He shook his head over the memory. "Mrs. Wrencher described every jewel in the bag. The stuff was hers, all right, and I returned it. After that I was a sort of hero—you know, an honest man. It turned out the jewels were worth about eighty thousand dollars."

I said, "Well! There must have been quite a reward."

"No reward at all," Gene said. "To

tell the truth, my girl was put out about that. But pretty soon we found out why there was no reward. It seemed Mrs. Wrencher had decided I'd already helped myself to it." His voice tightened. "She gave out the news that, besides the jewels, the bag had contained four thousand dollars in cash."

I stared. Gene's eyes met mine as though to gauge my reaction.

"Knowing me as you do," he asked, "would *you* think I kept it?"

"Of course not."

"Well, I didn't," he assured me. "There was no cash in that purse when I found it. If it had ever been there, Mrs. Wrencher must have lost it some place else, with her identification cards. Still, after she made the announcement, things started happening. Public opinion got busy in a hurry. Doubts. Suspicions. . . . I found people glancing at me in a questioning way. Once rumors begin to spread through a small place like Bardentown, they reach everybody. I could feel my friends cooling off. They edged away, then dropped me altogether. One by one—"

"Gene," I said, "that's the most outrageous thing I ever heard!"

"All the same, that's the way it went," he said. "Twice, at the high school, I found '\$4,000' and a big question mark scrawled on my blackboard. After a while parents came to talk to the principal. It seemed they weren't sure they wanted their youngsters taught and influenced by a man under suspicion of having stolen

money. . . . Oh, I had quite a time.

"But the worst thing happened when my girl dropped me. She blamed her parents, of course; it was all the way *they* felt. After that I knew I had no friends at all. I went around like an outcast — almost cursing the impulse that had made me report finding that purse. If only I'd been *dishonest* — if only I'd hidden the jewels for ten or fifteen years, saying nothing — I could have gone on being a happy man, married, with plenty of friends. But no. I had to be Honest Gene! . . . In the end I couldn't stand it any more. I got out of Bardentown. I came up here, where nobody knew me, and started running the camp."

I said, "Gene, that town was utterly unfeeling and unjust!"

He shrugged. "I thought so, too."

"I can't see how any *real* friends could have doubted you."

"But they did. It's queer, how the poison of suspicion gets into a decent mind."

So that was it, and I continued to think about Gene's story long after we went to bed in our tent, long after I could hear his deep, steady breathing that said Gene Russey was asleep.

I lay wide-awake, incensed by the cruelty of people who could ruin a man's life with nothing more concrete than suspicion. If I could trust him after knowing all the facts, why couldn't they?

What sort of viciousness is there in the human mind that allows it to lose faith in a friend so easily?

I was utterly filled with disgust for all the people who had joined to run Gene out of Bardentown.

The whole thing left me wondering — bitter, resentful.

And then, suddenly, I had a thought that made me sit up with a start. In the darkness I stared down at him. I felt shocked and I held my breath, because I couldn't help wondering:

Where had he got the money to buy the fishing camp?

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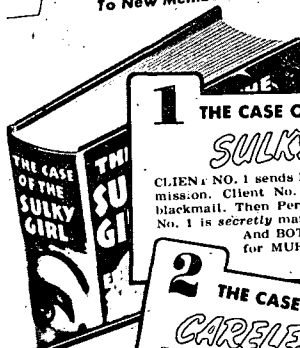
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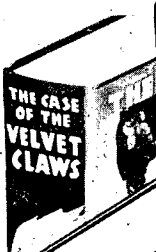
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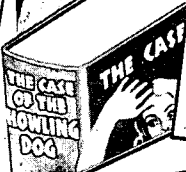
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